The Reshaping of a Tradition

American Benedictine Women
1852–1881

Ephrem Hollermann, O.S.B.
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by

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Foreword

The sculpture by Joseph H. O'Connell in the cover photo of this book depicts the death of Mother Benedicta Riepp in 1862. Entitled "First Death in Community," it stands in the Gathering Place of Sacred Heart Chapel in St. Joseph, Minnesota, and proclaims to this day that even in death, Benedictine women in the nineteenth century were putting down roots in a new land. The women portrayed in the sculpture are the founding mothers of a Benedictine way of life on a rugged frontier west of the Mississippi. Grief marks their faces. They reach out to support one of their own through the final phase of her life journey. They form a circle of intertwined arms, coming together as one. Some look inward. Others look outward. Gathered around one of their sisters who is dying, these women carved in stone bear witness today to the Christian reality of life through death.

The sculpture illustrates a reality over 130 years ago and it illustrates reality today. In 1862, death was a sign that the sisters were committed to live the gospel as Benedictine women in America. Death proclaimed their commitment to new life. The community, stable in the members’ support of each other and committed to the values and principles of their Benedictine monastic life, moved to new perspectives and responses to which their American experiences called them. This movement required changes that were difficult. Dying to familiar expressions of Benedictine life occurred frequently. The sisters grieved and life was nourished—life that can be seen and celebrated only in hindsight, a privileged perspective with which we are blessed today.

Today, too, women religious in North America are grieving the loss of what was familiar in times past. We, along with all of
our world, are going through foundational and rapid changes. We are excited as we anticipate the fruits of new dreams and the possibility of new identities and missions. We also fear the unknown dynamics inherent in these possibilities. Sometimes we feel we are dying. Our usual criteria for measuring success are being questioned. We are being challenged to walk through the tensions of the creative shifts occurring today. Often we are not able to recognize new signs of life. At times we feel throbs of hope that birth is occurring. While this birth calls forth our creativity and perseverance, we know, too, that it is beyond anything we can effect by ourselves. We, as did the apostles and our foremothers, are bearing witness in faith to the power of the resurrection in our lives and in the lives of others (Acts 4:33). We are being brought to a stance of truth—the posture of bowing before God who is Mystery, who authors the world in its journey to fullness.

Sister Ephrem Hollermann’s research and this book are gifts to all of us who know our hearts to be monastic, to all persons who hold God central. Through her work, we can gain courage from our foremothers who walked through times of great change. We can know ourselves as part of a long story of God’s loving action. The O’Connell sculpture offers us further reflection on this story. Carved from Bedford limestone with its history of 320–360 million years, the sculpture speaks to us of duration. The stone and our foremothers teach us of God’s enduring vision of fullness of life for all creation. They speak to us of God’s faithful love. They tell us of God’s stability with us as we walk our faith journey.

We recognize, too, that as the limestone consists primarily of the fossils of microscopic organisms, so each part of our personal and community histories contributes to the whole and something of our lives endures. Furthermore, we, like the stone, change and release the image of Christ through the forces of fire, wind, water, and chiseling in our current situations. The sculpture calls us to renew our commitment to the stabilizing and transforming elements of Benedictine life: listening as one dedicated to Jesus Christ and the monastic rhythm of prayer, work, communal interaction, hospitality, and service.

The experiences of our foremothers, recorded in this book and depicted in the O’Connell sculpture, call us to grow in trust that the Spirit who gave life through them is also with us. This Spirit is moving us to God’s future. This Spirit urges us to ask
questions that transform how we view and respond to ourselves and to the world. This Spirit is helping us realize that the transformation of ourselves and the world, now and in the future, expresses God’s creative action in the universe. This Spirit is assisting us to release the creative energy made possible when people of varying perspectives work together for the sake of God’s vision for the world. This Spirit helps us know that God has been with us, that God is here now and, here in our world, God will be.

July 11, 1993

Sister Mary Reuter, O.S.B., Prioress
Sisters of St. Benedict
St. Joseph, Minnesota
A nineteenth-century historian once remarked that the unity of history is such that anyone who endeavors to tell a piece of it must feel that the first sentence tears a seamless web. I have experienced the truth of that statement throughout this work, and wish to acknowledge the inherent limitations in my attempt to reconstruct a story that is by its nature organic. On the one hand, the historical record is fraught with gaps and requires seams to hold the web together. On the other hand, seemingly repetitious strands of the story spin a cocoon that encloses its meaning in a tightly knit narrative. Either or both of these images may serve to guide the reader in the same way that they have been useful to me in piecing together the often disparate elements of a complex and compelling story.

Just as the unity of history forms a seamless web, so too does the network of contributions made by those directly and indirectly involved with the process and completion of this book. Initially, I wish to thank my professors and colleagues in historical theology at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, among whom the original manuscript of this book came to birth and was completed. It was particularly gratifying to be supported by their conviction that a true and authentic history of Catholicism in the United States will be achieved only when the contributions of American Catholic sisterhoods are adequately documented and integrated into mainstream American Catholic history.

An enormous debt of gratitude is owing to the archivists of the Benedictine houses whose communities were the focus of my research and study. To the following women who responded to my initial survey, who welcomed me into their archives, who sent
me generous quantities of materials, and who offered me kind words of interest and encouragement, I offer heartfelt gratitude: Sisters Evangelist Kapusta (St. Marys, PA), Janet Staab (Erie, PA), Imogene Blatz (St. Joseph, MN), Immaculata Houtman (Ridgely, MD), Teresa Wolking (Covington, KY), Vivian Ivantic (Chicago, IL), Floriana Spalek (Covington, LA), Antoinette Fineran (Nauvoo, IL), Leonella Spanke (Fort Smith, AR), Ursula Thomas and Mary Louis George (Tulsa, OK), Margaret Dunne (St. Leo, FL), and Alma Bratsovcky (Lisle, IL).

Above all, I am grateful to the members of my own Benedictine community at St. Joseph, MN. For over thirty years they have nurtured in me a Benedictine heart, and most recently entrusted me with the time and financial resources to complete the study which has resulted in the publication of this book. Two former prioresses, Evin Rademacher and Katherine Howard, and our current prioress, Mary Reuter, have been particularly influential in this endeavor.

Several other members of my community made specific contributions to this work. Fidelis Hackert was an indispensible help in the translation and interpretation of German sources. Incarnata Girgen, with the help of Margretta Nathe, provided in Behind the Beginnings an invaluable collected translation of a large portion of letters relevant to this study. Ruth Nierengarten is responsible for the calligraphy in appendices 7, 9, 11 and 13. And Dorothy Manuel was solely responsible for the long and formidable word-processing stage of the original manuscript.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge my debt of gratitude to several members of an innovative monastic project being initiated on the campus of St. Benedict's in St. Joseph, MN. The STUDIUM aims to provide a forum for dialogue between Christian monastics and members of contemporary society through informal discussion, lectures, conferences and publications. Evin Rademacher, O.S.B., Linda Kulzer, O.S.B., and Kathleen Kalinowski, O.S.B., of the STUDIUM, have encouraged and promoted the publication of this book. I am grateful to be the beneficiary of their generous efforts to make this piece of the story of American Benedictine women available to a wider readership.

July 11, 1993
Ephrem Hollermann, O.S.B.
Feast of Benedict,
Patriarch of Western Monasticism
Introduction

It is jarring to the historical sensibilities of late twentieth-century American Benedictine women to recall an assertion made by Stephanus Hilpisch, O.S.B., in his unprecedented work on the history of Benedictine nuns.

Benedictine nuns did not make Benedictine history. This is not woman’s work. But in every era in which the ideal of the monastic life was recognized and proclaimed pure and undefiled by the monks, the nuns lived it in still greater purity and devotion. Often when the holy flame was already extinct in the monasteries, the nuns still guarded the light of Christ in their convents. This is the great contribution they have made to Benedictine history.¹

Even more startling is the realization that Hilpisch’s history was the first of its kind. Prior to its publication, no comprehensive and consistent history of Benedictine nuns had ever been attempted.² By the time it made its appearance in 1951, the historical tradition of Benedictine women in Europe was fourteen hundred years old, and American Benedictine women were about to celebrate the centennial of their arrival in North America.

Hilpisch conceded that the work was but a supplement to his earlier volume,³ and required “particular pains to work out the lines of development and to present the recurring influence of the monasteries on the convents.”⁴ In his view, Benedictine women had had only marginal significance in shaping the Benedictine past. True, they had lived the monastic ideal with “purity and devotion” in every era, but they had not “made” history. The recognition and proclamation of the monastic ideal, “pure and undefiled,” had been the work of men and that constituted Benedictine history-in-the making.
Hilpisch’s static view of history needs to be challenged as a prelude to the study undertaken here. The view of Benedictine history underlying his words in the statement above seems to consist in the recognition and proclamation of the monastic ideal in some pure and rarefied form. The enfleshment of the ideal in real human lives and situations he relegates to the domain of a “contribution” to history, great though it may be. The implication is that a contribution made to history is somehow not of the essence of history itself.

The phenomenon of monasticism, or Benedictinism as a particular expression of it, is a prime example of the more dynamic view of history-making that undergirds this study. Monasticism originated not as an idea, but as a way of life. It was born in the living of it by real people—men and women who had names, who chose to root themselves in particular places, whose desire it was to participate in a daily common round of activities centered in prayer and work. They were men and women whose purpose it was not to make history, not even to proclaim an ideal in the chaotic sixth-century society. Their purpose was simply to live, to embrace a way of conversion and to live in union with God.

Nevertheless, in the very living of their lives, most often in hidden and unassuming ways, monastics did indeed make history. In time their way of life and experience came to be called monasticism. Although there have been innumerable attempts over the centuries to forge out of their experience a monastic ideal, “pure and undefiled,” static and preserved for succeeding generations, monasticism’s uncontestable variety of forms continually bears witness to the living dynamic at the heart of its history. Therefore, it is neither possible nor even desirable to separate the living of the monastic ideal from the proclamation of it, or to say that the former is a contribution to history while the latter is history-in-the-making. If, as Hilpisch concedes, Benedictine women lived the monastic ideal, then they made history too. His assertion that history-making is not “woman’s work” betrays a widespread mentality, and perhaps explains why a more complete and authentic story of Benedictine women has yet to be told.

The fact remains that for a very long time Benedictine women, particularly American Benedictine women, have suffered an ambiguous monastic identity and therefore have not been afforded a full Benedictine status within the Church and monastic history. During the mid-to-late nineteenth-century period of
emerging Church law, and following the promulgation of the Code of Canon Law in 1917, Benedictine women were in danger of losing much of their distinctive character. They were forced in many instances to conform to rigid standardized norms when drawing up their proper constitutions.

The 1917 Code treated Benedictine women in North America as if they constituted a modern apostolic congregation, rather than autonomous communities of monastic women living under the Rule of Benedict and a Prioress. They were legally deprived of the right to profess solemn vows, and the formula common to non-monastic congregations, that of poverty, chastity and obedience, was mandated for them. This identification of Benedictine women was the consequence of the practical impossibility of observing papal enclosure in their New World circumstances. It is curious to note that Benedictine men in North America were observing a similar practice of modified enclosure, but it did not affect their identification as monastic, nor did it deprive them of their right to profess solemn vows.

The underlying conviction behind this book is that precisely under the above-described circumstances, Benedictine women in North America “made history.” Out of what were commonly perceived as negative circumstances in mid-nineteenth-century America, Benedictine women, by their unselfconscious living of an ancient charism, and impelled by a new mission to the People of God, reshaped their tradition in a New World.

It is the task of this study to tell, insofar as it is possible, a segment of the story that was history-in-the-making, the story of the nineteenth-century evolution of a new form of life according to the Rule of Benedict. The basic argument is that the process of transplanting the female tradition of Benedictine life from Eichstätt, Bavaria, to North America, necessitated some fundamental innovations which clearly reshaped the way of life embraced by Benedictine women in America. At the same time that the process of adaptation took into account the realities of a new time and place in American history, there was a level at which the European monastic tradition of life continued essentially the same as it had for fourteen hundred years, characterized by its steady rhythm of prayer, work and communal interaction.

The story of struggle and adaptation documented in this book was not unique to Benedictine women. Their contemporaries in apostolic congregations suffered as well, to gain recognition
within nineteenth-century Church structures. Ironically, their struggle was to maintain their unique orientation as apostolic congregations despite frequent ecclesiastical mandates that sought to monasticize them. The process of adapting their European heritage to American circumstances was similarly far-reaching, and was often thwarted by clerical attempts to have them conform to Tridentine norms based on the monastic model of religious life. Ultimately, the struggle of both apostolic and monastic women religious in the nineteenth-century was a struggle to be taken seriously as women—women who sought to serve an emerging immigrant Church, while at the same time desiring to remain faithful to their cherished charisms.

It is hoped that this book will aid all American women religious, standing on the threshold of the twenty-first century, to understand anew the forces that have brought them to the challenging historical moment in which they stand. Perhaps the methodology of this book will also serve to encourage a variety of religious congregations to re-read and to re-interpret their primary sources from the point of view of the women who experienced their pioneer history. Individually and collectively, contemporary American women religious have a profoundly moving story to tell and a hopeful future to create.

**Contemporary Relevance of This Study**

**Nineteenth-Century Background**

For thirteen centuries after the *Rule of Benedict,* the *raison d'être* of Benedictine women had been simply to be monastic. Being cenobitic monastic consisted in living a common life under the *Rule of Benedict* and in obedience to an Abbess or Prioress. The goal of their profession of *stabilitas, conversatio,* and *obedientia* was the promotion of the union of their individual lives with God within the cenobitic context of prayer and work. Daily they devoted themselves to the *opus Dei* (Divine Office), the center and source of all private prayer and work. Their work was both manual and intellectual. However, since their solemn profession required
strict enclosure their work did not typically include external works of charity.

A new era for Benedictine women was inaugurated as a result of the French Revolution and the German secularization. By official decree in 1803, all imperial and prince abbeys were dissolved. Convents which did not have such a rank fell to the princes as compensation for their wartime losses. When the restoration of the Benedictine Order was initiated by King Ludwig I of Bavaria in 1830, some of the old convents that had withstood the general destruction of the era were allowed to reopen on condition that the women still living in them could become self-supporting. Thus, for the first time in their long history, Benedictine women were forced to take on external works, such as teaching, as a means of earning their livelihood. The necessity of engaging in this new kind of work required enormous change in their style of life, and by the time the first Benedictine women came to North America in 1852, their way of life had become less and less identifiable as “monastic” in the old sense.

In 1852 the first Benedictine sisters arrived in North America from St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt, Bavaria. Sponsored by King Ludwig I of Bavaria and Abbot Boniface Wimmer of St. Vincent’s Abbey in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, the small group of three women headed by Mother Benedicta Riepp established the first Benedictine house of women in the United States—St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, Pennsylvania. Within five years, and after the arrival of eleven other women from St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt, other houses were founded from St. Marys, in Erie, Pennsylvania (1856), Newark, New Jersey (1857), and St. Cloud, Minnesota (1857). As early as 1856, misunderstandings had arisen between Benedicta Riepp and Boniface Wimmer which forced Benedicta to appeal to Rome for a decision regarding the extent of her authority and that of the Abbot in governing the convent in St. Marys and the houses founded from there.

Within seven short years after their arrival in America, the monastic identity of Benedictine women had become ambiguous. Three of the major identifying features of their European monastic tradition had given way to the exigencies of adaptation within a new cultural and religious context. In 1858 Wimmer had taken the liberty to dispense the sisters from praying Matins, and had petitioned Rome to allow the sisters to pray the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin instead of the full monastic Divine Office. In 1859 a
decree from Rome replaced their solemn vows with simple perpetual vows, in effect removing their enclosure to which simply professed religious were not bound. In addition, the decree removed them from the jurisdiction of Boniface Wimmer as president of the American-Cassinese Congregation, and placed them under the jurisdiction of the bishops in whose dioceses they were located.

The Roman Decree of 1859 set the adaptation of Benedictine women to the cultural and religious circumstances of America on a course which eventually led to their redefinition within the law of the church. When the canons governing religious institutes were definitively codified in 1917, groups of American Benedictine women came to be redefined as communities dedicated to the works of the apostolate, over against the definition for monastic institutes of men and women—a redefinition that has prevailed and shaped American Benedictine women until recent times.

**Contemporary Problem of Renewal**

The mandate of Vatican Council II in *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965), that institutes of religious life renew themselves in keeping with the original spirit of their founders and foundresses, has posed a peculiar problem for American Benedictine women. On the one hand, the mandate signaled the need and awakened the desire for the reappropriation of a monastic identity in continuity with a 1500-year-old cenobitic monastic tradition. On the other hand, since communities of Benedictine women had been subject to the canons of the church governing apostolic institutes for the major portion of their history in America, they had appropriated elements of an apostolic identity within the American Church.

Consequently, the post-Vatican II renewal task for American Benedictine women has been two-pronged and complex—that of proceeding in continuity with a 1500-year-old cenobitic monastic tradition, while at the same time integrating the essentially apostolic component of their more than 100-year-old history in America. Put another way, the mandate for renewal and adaptation within the cultural and religious context of twentieth-century America has posed a problem of reidentification for American Benedictine women of the last quarter of this century.
Reidentification is a complex process. It cannot be accomplished by a simple return to the sixth-century sources of Benedictinism, by a kind of "leapfrogging backwards to a Golden Age before the nineteenth century." Because the nineteenth-century appropriation of apostolic works by American Benedictine women has sometimes been viewed as a distortion of their monastic tradition, there exists the danger of discounting the experience of nineteenth-century pioneer Benedictine women, in an effort to retrieve the monastic charism in some pristine form. Perhaps that is why renewal efforts in the first ten-to-fifteen years after Vatican II focused mainly on theological formation and the study of pre-Benedictine and sixth-century sources. While recognizing those efforts as logical first steps toward renewal and adaptation, it is unfortunate that study of the nineteenth-century founding inspiration of Benedictine women in North America, and its revivified approach to Benedictine life, has been virtually bypassed.

Current Stage of Renewal

A widely recognized theory dealing with the recovery of religious life is helpful in assessing the current stage of renewal among American Benedictine women, and in determining the contemporary relevance of this study. The premise of the recovery model of Fitz and Cada is that Vatican Council II ushered in a sixth era of transition in the long history of religious life. Exactly what new dominant image of religious life will emerge during this new era of transition cannot be predicted at this time.

What emerged as characteristic from Fitz and Cada's study of the long evolution of religious life was a sequence of identifiable phases of growth, decline, transition, and growth again under a new image of religious life. According to their four-phased schema, it can be concluded that the years between 1800 and the 1960's represented a growth phase in the history of religious life. It was a period characterized by the elaboration and development of the then dominant image of religious life, the teaching congregations. The challenge of Vatican Council II in 1965, to renew and adapt to the contemporary world, signaled for many religious communities a period of crisis, resembling past phases of decline.
when the dominant image of religious life came under strong question and seemed no longer suited to the aspirations of the age. In identifying the current phase of religious life as one of transition, Fitz and Cada view it as a period of revitalization in which variations of the dominant image of religious life are beginning to emerge. They predict that in time, only gradually, a new dominant image will emerge, and a growth phase under the new image will ensue.  

More specifically applied to particular religious communities, Fitz and Cada delineate a cycle of growth and decline that can be divided into five periods. In the **FOUNDATION** period the life of the community revolves around a founding person’s vision and the impetus to live the religious life in a particular way. Something new is formulated out of a critique of the current circumstances and an appropriation of the past. The **EXPANSION** period is a time during which community norms and customs are fashioned. New members sustain the hope for further growth and success. During the **STABILIZATION** period the number of community members continues to grow, but geographical expansion slows down somewhat. The community’s purpose is self-evident and is being accomplished. When **BREAKDOWN** sets in, the apparent immutabilities of the stabilization period begin to collapse. During this period, which may last from ten to fifty years, unanswered questions about the purpose and identity of the community begin to accumulate. The service rendered to the church by the community’s members begins to lack direction, the membership declines, and some long established community works are terminated. Following breakdown, a **TRANSITION** period begins that may last from twenty to twenty-five years. If a particular community survives the breakdown period, the transition phase is marked by a time of recovery and revitalization. Revitalization is a comprehensive process that moves a community from breakdown, to reassessment, to redefinition, and finally to a new way of concretely responding to the needs of the Church and of the world.  

The reassessment phase of the process is of particular interest for this study. Critical in this phase is a community’s ability to remember and recover, that is to develop a shared memory of the events of the past, and then to retrieve the important insights and meaning that are part of the past. Anchored by a shared memory and its meanings, a community is freer then to search and to
experiment, to be exposed to new variations in its life and its work. The subsequent process of selecting allows the community to reflect on the experiments it has undertaken and to choose those new patterns of life and work which correspond to the call of the Spirit. All of these steps have as their goal the eventual incorporation and establishment of new patterns and meanings that have a basic continuity with events and meanings of the past. 19

The preceding overview of Fitz and Cada’s theory of religious recovery provides a framework within which to view the 140-year history of Benedictine women in America as one cycle in the centuries-long historical tradition of Benedictine women. 20

The FOUNDATION period (1852–1859) 21 was marked by the planting of the first American Benedictine convent in St. Marys, PA, from St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt in 1852. This period also witnessed the early development from St. Marys to Erie, PA (1856), Newark, NJ (1857), and St. Cloud, MN (1857), and from Erie to Covington, KY (1859). It was during this time too that the conflict between Boniface Wimmer and Benedicta Riepp, the American superiors of Benedictine men and women, climaxed and resulted in the Roman Decree of 1859.

The EXPANSION period (1860–1881) was marked by the establishment of ten new and eventually permanent houses, most of them in the West. New foundations were made in Illinois, Kansas, Indiana, Virginia, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Louisiana, Arkansas and Oklahoma. In addition, this period witnessed the establishment of the first non-Bavarian Benedictine convent in America—the Maryville, Missouri, foundation from Maria Rickenbach in Switzerland (1874). During this period the demands of apostolic work often resulted in the modification of traditional monastic observances.

The somewhat long STABILIZATION period (1881–1965), which is outside the scope of this book, was marked by consolidation and institutional growth. During this era the four major congregations of American Benedictine women were formed, more Swiss Benedictine communities were founded, and the frontier experience gradually gave way to the forces of Americanization. As a result there occurred movements in some of the older houses against certain activities that were viewed as non-monastic.

It is more difficult to determine the parameters of the last two periods in the cycle because they describe the contemporary era of American Benedictine women. At this relatively early stage of
Vatican II’s aftermath, it appears that elements of both decline and transition intermingle, and remain characteristic of the years spanning from 1965 to the present. The period from 1965–1975 exhibited rather clear signs of BREAKDOWN. Many features of the traditional Benedictine life style came to be judged as archaic against the backdrop “signs of the times,” and began to fall away. Questions about the purpose and function of this history-laden way of life proliferated. The sense of Benedictine identity blurred as professed members left in large numbers, and the promise of new members waned. The viability of long established works in communities came into question, and some of those works were terminated.

At the same time that American Benedictine communities of women experienced features of decline, they began to exhibit some clear signs that they were moving into a TRANSITION period marked by revitalization and reidentification. In 1975, the fifty-five member Conference of American Benedictine Prioresses, representing approximately 6,400 Benedictine women, approved a statement of monastic values in the lives of American Benedictine women, entitled Upon This Tradition. In it they proclaimed fidelity to the western tradition of cenobitic monasticism, characterized by a common life under the Rule of Benedict and a Prioress. In what might be considered the clearest and strongest paragraph of the entire document, the Prioresses asserted:

It is the purpose of this document to identify once again the elements of the Benedictine tradition which give basis to the religious life in the communities of American Benedictine Sisters at this time. We trace the origin of these values from our earliest histories and keep them virtually present in each of our communities still. We recognize these to be the cenobitic life; the Rule of Benedict; the three monastic vows of obedience, stability, conversion; personal and common prayer; and the gospel ministry.

Since 1975 the Conference has promulgated three more statements subtitled under Upon This Tradition. These subsequent documents further elaborate the basic values and goals in the lives of American Benedictine women and function as guides for the continuing renewal and revitalization in their respective communities.

In 1980, Benedictine women and men throughout the world celebrated the sesquimillennium of the birth of Benedict of Nursia (A.D. 480) and his sister, Scholastica. During that year innumerable conferences, symposiums, workshops and lectures were held...
throughout the world, not only in celebration, but in dynamic pursuit of the reappraisal, revitalization, and renewal of Benedictine life the world over. One of the monumental achievements of the sesquimillennial celebration for American Benedictines was the publication of a new English translation of the Rule of Benedict.

In the fall of 1987 the first international symposium of Benedictine women was held at San Anselmo in Rome, Italy. Eighty-five representatives from around the world gathered to reflect again on the Rule of Benedict in view of the contemporary circumstances in communities of Benedictine women. Their overarching goal was to gain a broader knowledge and understanding of the many facets of female monasticism in the current era. In the fall of 1993, a second international symposium convened in Rome, focused on multicultural dimensions of monastic profession.

While these events are hopeful signs that the reidentification task has begun among American Benedictine women with vigor and vitality, it must be recognized that there is still a long and toilsome road ahead. In 1975, Fitz and Cada argued that "religious life in America is undergoing a profound transition, which will take another twenty to twenty-five years to run its full course." If their thesis is true, it will probably be a good while yet before the main features of the next era of Benedictine women in America will begin to emerge in easily discernible form. In the meantime there is much historical homework waiting to be done.

An underlying assumption in this book is that American Benedictine women of the last quarter of the twentieth century are in a period of transition characterized by the revitalization process as described by Fitz and Cada. The "remembering and recovering" dimension of that process is the locus from which this book gains its contemporary relevance. It is in the continuing development of a shared memory of the events of their past, that Benedictine women in America today will be able to retrieve insights and meanings critical to their reidentification within a twenty-first century cultural and religious context. A grasp of both the history and traditions of their American past is an essential framework for understanding any of the current conditions and future prospects. Without an awareness of their unique historical development in North America, the contemporary concern for reidentification as monastic women will be somewhat inauthentic.
Because of what this author perceives as a tendency at times to disregard the nineteenth-century experience of American Benedictine women, or to judge it too quickly as a distortion of their ancient monastic tradition, there is a pressing need to study the transitional way of life which characterized Benedictine women during their founding years in North America. Insight into their transitional way of life is the basis for a more integral view of both the continuous and stable elements that supported their community life, prayer, and work, as well as the fundamental innovations which shaped their tradition in America. That more integral view is the goal and aim of this study.

**Scope**

The foundation (1852–1859) and expansion (1860–1881) periods in the 140-year history of Benedictine women in America represent approximately one-fiftieth of the 1500-year-old history of Benedictine nuns and about one-fifth of their history in North America. Although twenty-nine years may seem insignificant within that perspective, the years from 1852–1881 are the focus of this study. It is a segment of time bounded by the arrival of the first three Benedictine women in North America, and the first General Chapter meeting of seven Benedictine prioresses and four other community representatives in Chicago, Illinois, on July 19, 1881. The purpose of the first General Chapter meeting was to unite the then existing communities of the Order of St. Benedict into a congregation and to adopt their first set of constitutions adapting the *Rule of Benedict* to American circumstances.²⁹

The primary focus of this book is on the women and the way of life from 1852–1881. In researching this segment of time, the chief aims were 1) to identify the early foundresses of Benedictinism in North America, 2) to describe as far as possible the experiences and role of these women in the early spread of the Order in the United States, and 3) to discover some of the continuities and discontinuities between their life in America and in Europe. The results of this research yielded deeper insight into the nineteenth-century founding experience of American Benedictine women.
A study of this nature has necessary limits. Research was restricted to the first fifteen communities of Benedictine women founded between 1852 and 1881, whose origins can be traced back to St. Walburg Convent, Eichstätt, Bavaria, through the first American foundation in St. Marys, PA. Of these fifteen, the first five foundations will receive particularly thorough treatment due to their centrality in the foundation period (1852–1859). The other ten communities were founded during the expansion period (1860–1881), and will be treated more generally with an interest in describing the way of life characteristic of the foundation and expansion periods.

Although outside the scope of this study, mention of the 1874 foundation of Benedictine women in Maryville, Missouri, is important to the story of the subsequent spread of Benedictinism in North America. After the Eichstätt beginnings, Benedictine convents in Switzerland, France, and other parts of Germany sent sisters to North America. The first of these convents to participate in the mission to the New World was the convent of Maria Rickenbach in Canton Unterwalden, Switzerland. In 1874 a group of pioneers from there settled in Maryville, Missouri, an enterprise which resulted in two separate foundations, one at Yankton, South Dakota, where the active apostolate of teaching and nursing was taken up, and the other at Clyde, Missouri, where the Benedictines of Perpetual Adoration were established to pursue a more cloistered and contemplative expression of Benedictine life. The parallel development and spread of American Benedictinism among men is a major topic that also falls outside the scope of this study.

It comes as no surprise to note that most of the significant literature in the field of Benedictine studies, both European and American, has been written by men about men’s communities. One reason why this study has been undertaken is that comprehensive works on the history and experience of American Benedictine women in the nineteenth century are virtually nonexistent. While both published and unpublished local histories of individual women’s communities abound, there has been no work to date seeking to explore the nineteenth-century experience of American Benedictine women from the perspective of the whole or a segment of the whole. Therefore, in order to give focal attention to women’s history in this study, only incidental references
will be made to the very influential role male Benedictinism has had among Benedictine women in America.  

A further issue which will be treated only incidentally in this study is the more external canonical dimension of the struggle of American Benedictine women toward monastic identity within nineteenth-century Church structure. The primary interest here is in the more internal, personal and communal struggle toward monastic identity as the women themselves experienced it. References to the canonical struggle as well as to the influence of male Benedictinism on the women’s development will occur only when those factors contribute to a greater understanding of the individual and communal lives of the women and way of life under study.

**Methodology**

A contemporary historian of Christian liturgy has aptly described the relationship of history to tradition. His insight is particularly instructive for the following reflection on the methodology of this study.

... a tradition can be understood only genetically, with reference to its origin and evolution. Those ignorant of history are prisoners of the latest cliche, for they have nothing against which to test it... The past is always instructive, but not necessarily normative. What we do today is ruled not by the past but by the adaptation of tradition to the needs of the present. History can only help us decide what the essentials of that tradition are, and the parameters of its adaptation.  

The title of this book, "The Reshaping of a Tradition," adopts Taft’s organic understanding of the term “tradition.” “Tradition” emphasizes the living, growing, developing, dynamic character of Benedictine life, as opposed to another more static view of Benedictine “traditions” which tend to promote antiquarianism. The tradition of Benedictine life under study here can be quite readily described as that way of cenobitic life prescribed by the Rule of Benedict, under an Abbot, Abbess or Prioress, characterized by the monastic vows of stability, conversion of life, obedience, and devoted to the balanced interplay of prayer (both individual and
Introduction

communal) and work. These are the essentials of the Benedictine tradition as it traces its origin back to the monastic reform of Benedict of Nursia in the sixth century. These are the elements that are normative and constitute the tradition—a living force whose contingent expressions can change and have done so often in the past.

Benedictine history clearly does record "traditions," those myriad manifestations and expressions of the Benedictine tradition throughout its 1500-year past. History in this sense is not normative. It is instructive, however, insofar as it helps to determine the essentials of the tradition and the "parameters of its adaptation." This study is meant to be history in that instructive sense. It is an examination of one limited segment of the history of Benedictine women in America, aimed at discovering how their living of the tradition reshaped it in a new era and under wholly new circumstances.

The methodology of this study reflects a five-step process of research, reconstruction, retrieval, reflection and reidentification. While this book is offered as a potential contribution to the work of renewal and reidentification going on among American Benedictine women today, its intent is not to draw definitive conclusions or to suggest a paradigm for reidentification. Rather, the conclusion is meant to be reflective in tone. Its purpose is simply to spell out some of the elements and values of the founding inspiration operative among Benedictine women in America from 1852–1881.

Research

The central questions guiding the research involved in this study were: 1) Who were the "invisible" women of the founding period of Benedictine women in America? 2) What did they experience during the planting and expansion years of their Order in North America? 3) What continuities and discontinuities with the ancient tradition of Bavarian Benedictinism characterized their way of life and reshaped it during the founding and expansion eras?

The major source of information for this book is a body of correspondence consisting of approximately 142 letters written by and to key people in the founding story of Benedictine women in
A significant portion of these letters have been recently collected, translated, and published in a single-volume work. Unfortunately, the majority of the letters under study here were written by the men involved in the story. Fortunately, there are fifteen extant letters of Benedicta Riepp in this collection, and approximately twenty-five others written by women who had significant roles in the founding of American Benedictine women. As a result, it must be noted that often the women’s story is dependent upon the facts revealed in the correspondence by men. Other letters used in this study, but not included in Girgen’s collection, were gathered from many other sources, particularly from the archives of Benedictine women’s houses throughout the United States.

Additional primary source materials used in this study, such as statutes, constitutions, personal data files, entrance record books, chronicles, memoirs, and Chapter proceedings were also gathered from archival repositories located in houses of Benedictine women. Published and unpublished local histories of the fifteen houses of Benedictine women founded between 1852 and 1881 provided much useful information. These histories, often overlooked by historians because of their alleged uncritical methodology, contain valuable information about religious practices, forms of piety, attitudinal biases and other data which shed light on the forces at work shaping the way of life on the local level.

Reconstruction

Chapter I of this study sketches in broad strokes the European and American background for the transplantation of the European Benedictine tradition on American soil, and thereby provides the context for chapters II, III, and IV which embody the historical reconstruction of the foundation and expansion periods (1852–1881). Past attempts at telling the story of these years have often resulted in fragmented accounts, which then usually served as preludes to the telling of yet another story. The aim of chapters II and III is to tell the story of the years from 1852–1859 as if it were just one story. Indeed it was just that, for only after the Roman Decree of 1859 did the five then-established communities become independent and begin to develop histories of their own.
To say that chapters II, III and IV employ a methodology of reconstruction is to say that the result is a historical narrative based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particulars from the authentic materials, and the synthesis of those particulars into an account that will stand the test of critical methods. In this case the critical examination of sources has often meant the re-reading of the primary source material behind the secondary literature, with particular attention given to the often neglected dimension of the women’s experience as it is reflected there.

Therefore, the focus of chapter II is on the forty women who comprised the first community of Benedictine women in North America from 1852–1855. Since there is no legacy of writings by the women themselves from which to learn their stories firsthand, this study has had to depend on what they did and what was written about them as channels for the disclosure of their experience and world of meaning. The story has been carefully crafted in a manner that will not only provide the reader with their names, birth dates, ethnic origins, dates of entrance, investiture, and profession of vows, but will also suggest 1) how these women understood the providence of God and the role of suffering in their lives, 2) how they worked and prayed and obeyed, and 3) how they dealt with risk, change, and the desire to remain faithful to the spirit of their origins.

Chapter III seeks to trace the dispersal of approximately half of the forty women who comprised the seminal community at St. Marys to branch houses in Erie, Newark, St. Cloud, and Covington, KY, within the context of the growing tension between Benedicta Riepp and Boniface Wimmer. As in chapter II, the focus will be on the women around whom the conflict swirled. The stories of the women introduced in chapter II will be expanded to include whatever experiences were theirs as the process of planting the Benedictine way of life in America further unfolded from 1856–1859.

Chapter IV is a very brief but necessary overview of the ten communities founded during the expansion period of Benedictine women in America (1860–1881). Although their founding stories cannot be extensively detailed, the experience of the women in these houses provides additional data for the analysis in chapter V.
Retrieval

No mere reconstruction of historical data can fully capture the inner spirit of a way of life or the shape of a tradition which emerges in a given era as a legacy to future generations. Nonetheless, historical data can be the channel through which a particular manifestation of a tradition can be assessed. The task of historical retrieval involves the discovery of the normative thread, the continuity of experience which constitutes the genuine meaning and truth of a tradition at a given stage in history.

The methodology of retrieval at work in chapter V will result in a description of the characteristic way of life among Benedictine women during the foundation and expansion periods of their history in America. An analysis of the continuities and discontinuities of that way of life with the Bavarian Benedictine tradition that was their heritage, will proceed within the framework of a comparison between the 1846 statutes and constitutions of St. Walburg Convent, Eichstätt, Bavaria, and the first set of constitutions for American Benedictine women published in 1880.41 This analysis is aimed at yielding a deeper and more appropriate understanding of how the Benedictine tradition was revitalized and reshaped within the cultural and religious context of nineteenth-century America.

A Benedictine historian recently observed that “the histories don’t seem to give much of a clue as to why [the sisters’] communities were so successful, though certain things seem obvious: the primacy of the spirit of sacrifice, the very simple way of life, devotion of service to the church, lots of charity to one another, and even some kindly, helpful clergy.”42 It is hoped that this book will not only help to validate Beckman’s observation, but will ultimately bear witness to a “love stern as death.”43

Notes


The exact date of composition is uncertain. Scholars agree that the *Rule* was written in Latin by Benedict of Nursia (A.D. ca. 480–550) sometime between ca. 525 and 550 while he served as Abbot of a monastery in Monte Cassino, Italy. References to the text of the *Rule* in this study will be from Timothy Fry, O.S.B., et. al, eds. *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English With Notes* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981).

* RB 1980, 58: 17


The Reshaping of a Tradition


14 The first five eras are: 1) the Era of the Desert Fathers (A.D. 200–500); 2) the Era of Monasticism (A.D. 500–1200); 3) the Era of Mendicant Orders (1200–1500); 4) the Era of Apostolic Orders (1500–1800); 5) the Era of the Teaching Congregations (1800–present). Fitz and Cada, Shaping the Coming Age of Religious Life, pp. 11–50.


16 See appendix 1.

17 Fitz and Cada, Shaping the Coming Age of Religious Life, pp. 51–61.

18 Whitley, p. 6–7.


20 For further studies applying sociological theories, such as that of Fitz and Cada, to the history and experience of Benedictine men, see Cuthbert Whitley, O.S.B., "The Revitalization Process in Religious Life: A Study of a Benedictine Congregation" (Ph.D. dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1977); Richard Endress, "The Enduring Vision: Stability and Change in an American Benedictine Monastery" (Ph.D. dissertation, Purdue University, 1974); idem, "Monastic Community: A

21 See appendix 1.


23 Upon This Tradition, paragraph #17.

24 Of Time Made Holy (A Statement on the Liturgy of the Hours), March 5, 1978; Of All Good Gifts (A Statement on the Nature of Stewardship), June 19, 1980; Toward Full Discipleship (An Interim Statement on the Role of Benedictine Women in Church and Society), March 31, 1984. All of these statements were published by Benet Press, Erie, PA.

25 Notable among them was the international symposium held in Rome. See proceedings edited by Stephanie Campbell, O.S.B., in As We Seek God: International Reflections on Contemporary Benedictine Monasticism (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983). For the report on North American Benedictine women, see pp. 111-123.

26 RB 1980 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981). For the first time in their history, American Benedictine women and men have in one volume a new English translation of the Rule accompanied by the critical Latin text of Dom Jean Neufville, an introductory survey of the history of monasticism, an appendix containing essays on key monastic topics, a selected Latin concordance, a thematic index, indexes of Scripture and Patristic works in the Rule, a comprehensive listing of the houses of Benedictine monks and nuns in North America, and a general name and subject index.


28 Ibid., p. 717.


30 These fifteen communities have continued in existence up to the present day and are listed chronologically here according to their founding dates, and under the place names given in the 1993 edition of The Official Catholic Directory: St. Joseph Monastery, St. Marys, PA (1852); Mt. St. Benedict Monastery, Erie, PA (1856); St. Benedict’s Convent, St. Joseph, MN (1857); St. Gertrude Monastery, Ridgely, MD (1857); St. Walburg Monastery, Covington, KY (1859); St. Scholastica Priory, Chicago, IL (1861); Mount St. Scholastica, Atchison, KS (1863); Monastery of the Immaculate Conception, Ferdinand, IN (1867); St. Benedict Monastery, Bristow, VA (1868); St. Walburga Monastery, Elizabeth, NJ (1868); St. Benedict Monastery, Pittsburgh, PA (1870); St. Scholastica Priory,
Covington, LA (1870); St. Mary Priory, Nauvoo, IL (1874); St. Scholastica Monastery, Fort Smith, AR (1879); St. Joseph Monastery, Tulsa, OK (1879).


33 An exception, of course, is the role played by Abbot Boniface Wimmer in the women’s story. His relationship to the pioneer Benedictine women in America is an integral part of their founding story, and will be treated accordingly.

34 See footnote 5 of this Introduction.


36 See Appendix 2 for a chronological listing of these letters.

37 Incarnata Girgen, O.S.B., Behind the Beginnings. The bulk of this work is comprised of the letters themselves. There is explanatory material interspersed throughout the book, but no deliberate attempts were made toward interpretation.

38 Approximately forty-six of the letters in appendix 2 were written by Abbot Boniface Wimmer of St. Vincent’s Monastery in Latrobe, PA, who sponsored the mission of Benedictine women to America in 1852. Wimmer was an unusually prolific letter writer, as evidenced by the 1,188 extant letters written by him and preserved in the archives of St. Vincent Archabbey. See Warren Murrman, O.S.B., “The Wimmer Correspondence: A Collection and a Project,” Benedictine Confluence 6 (1972):16–23.

39 Although Regina Baska’s account of the founding years in America is the most thorough of all the published accounts to date, she tells it for

40 The five communities established between 1852 and 1859 were in 1) St. Marys, PA, 2) Erie, PA, 3) Newark, NJ, 4) St. Cloud, MN, and 5) Covington, KY.

41 *Konstitutionen* (Eichstätt, Bavaria: St. Walburg Kloster, 1846), and *Constitution of St. Scholastica for the Sisters of St. Benedict in the United States* (Chicago: C.M. Staiger, 1880).


43 Song of Songs 8:6, used in the liturgy for the Feast of St. Scholastica, February 10.
# Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MICA</td>
<td>Monastery Immaculate Conception Archives, Ferdinand, Indiana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LMA</td>
<td>Ludwig-Missionsverein Archives, Munich, West Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSBMA</td>
<td>Mount St. Benedict Monastery Archives, Erie, Pennsylvania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSSA</td>
<td>Mount St. Scholastica Archives, Atchison, Kansas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBCA</td>
<td>St. Benedict’s Convent Archives, St. Joseph, Minnesota</td>
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<tr>
<td>SBMA</td>
<td>St. Benedict Monastery Archives, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania</td>
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<tr>
<td>SGMA</td>
<td>St. Gertrude Monastery Archives, Ridgely, Maryland</td>
</tr>
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<td>SJAA</td>
<td>St. John’s Abbey Archives, Collegeville, Minnesota</td>
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<tr>
<td>SJMAT</td>
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<tr>
<td>SJMA</td>
<td>St. Joseph Monastery Archives, St. Marys, Pennsylvania</td>
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<td>SMPA</td>
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<td>SSMA</td>
<td>St. Scholastica Monastery Archives, Fort Smith, Arkansas</td>
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<td>SSPA</td>
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<td>SVAA</td>
<td>St. Vincent Archabbey Archives, Latrobe, Pennsylvania</td>
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<td>SWAA</td>
<td>St. Walburg Abbey Archives, Eichstätt, Germany</td>
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<td>SWMA</td>
<td>St. Walburg Monastery Archives, Covington, Kentucky</td>
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<tr>
<td>SWMAE</td>
<td>St. Walburga Monastery Archives, Elizabeth, New Jersey</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNDA</td>
<td>University of Notre Dame Archives, Notre Dame, Indiana</td>
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Chapter I

The Historical Tradition and American Context of Benedictine Women

In the year 1035, when Count Leodegar of Lechsmünd and Graisbach founded a Benedictine convent at the tomb of Walburga (A.D. 710–799) in Eichstätt, Bavaria, the tradition of women living in community and following the Rule of Benedict was approximately four hundred years old. In 1985, when St. Walburg Abbey in Eichstätt, the house that gave birth to Benedictinism among women in North America, celebrated the 950th anniversary of its founding, it marked its place in the long and variegated historical tradition of Benedictine monasticism in the West. St. Walburg Abbey had participated in all but approximately four hundred years of the 1,400 year old tradition of women living under the Rule of Benedict and an Abbess.
Fourteen Hundred Years of Benedictine Women

The story of the dissemination of the Rule of Benedict throughout the European continent is complex, and for the most part obscure. The broad outlines of the story can be sketched, but precisely when and where this Rule intended for men was adapted for use in monasteries of women is difficult to determine. It is unlikely that a Benedictine community of women existed in the sixth century. Although the Dialogues of Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604) introduce the reader to the sister of Benedict, Scholastica, who resided "in a house belonging to the monastery a short distance from the entrance," it is illusory to regard Scholastica as the first Benedictine nun in Christian history. While Gregory reports that she "had been consecrated to God in early childhood," there is simply no conclusive evidence to suggest that, first of all, she actually existed, and secondly, that she was one among a large category of women in her day who were set apart as consecrated virgins. If, indeed, she belonged to a community of women in Rome, it is necessary to note that most monasteries of women during the sixth century followed rules given them by their "local bishops who devised them in eclectic fashion from existing rules." Nonetheless, Gregory presented Scholastica as a woman who had followed the teachings of her brother Benedict. By introducing her to his readers, he offered to succeeding generations of Benedictine women, a model and source of inspiration in their desire to seek God in a cenobitic way of life.

Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480–550) wrote his Rule for the monks of Monte Cassino, a monastery in Italy founded by him after he migrated from his hermitage in Subiaco (ca. 529). Following its codification about 540, there is no record to indicate that Benedict's Rule was followed anywhere else except perhaps at Terracina, a monastery mentioned in the Dialogues of Gregory. History does record the destruction of Monte Cassino in the aftermath of the Lombard invasion in 568, and two centuries later Paul the Deacon reported a tradition that the monks of Monte Cassino had taken the Rule with them when they escaped to Rome. What became of the community in Rome is not known, but it is commonly held among historians of the Rule that the copy rescued from the destruction of Monte Cassino was the same one still in Rome around 750, when Pope Zachary sent it to the restored Abbey of Monte Cassino.
Gregory the Great praised the *Rule* in the *Dialogues*, but praise is insufficient evidence to conclude that his monastery or any of the other Roman monasteries were governed by the *Rule of Benedict* at that time. As in the case of women, it was also typical for men’s monasteries of the time to draw upon a number of extant rules. This was the case in Italy, as well as in Ireland and Gaul, well into the sixth and seventh centuries.

Actual use of the *Rule of Benedict* surfaced in the early part of the seventh century in southern Gaul, when Venerandus, the founder of a monastery in Altaripa, sent a copy of Benedict’s *Rule* to his bishop and asked that its observance be imposed upon the abbot and the monks. Shortly after this, the *Rule of Benedict* came to light again in a *Rule* written by Donatus, bishop of Besancon, for a community of women founded by his mother. This *Regula Donati* consisted of excerpts from the rules of Benedict, Casesarius of Arles (ca. 470–542), and Columban (ca. 543–615), the majority of which were derived from the *Rule of Benedict*.

Another factor at work in furthering the spread of the *Rule of Benedict* by the end of the seventh century was the influence of the Anglo-Saxons. In 596 Gregory the Great had sent Augustine (d. 604 or 605) and forty companions from his own monastery of St. Andrew on the Coelian to evangelize England. These missionaries were monks, but it is not known definitively that they followed the *Rule of Benedict*. This uncertainty has led to two predominant theories about the propagation of the *Rule* in England. It may have been brought to Canterbury in Kent by the Gregorian missionaries, or it may have found its way to the Northumbrian region through the agency of Wilfrid of York (634–709), who after returning from a journey to Rome in 653 introduced the *Rule of Benedict* in its entirety into his monasteries in Ripan and Hexham.⁴

**Seventh and Eighth Centuries**

**Foundation⁵**

The former theory has led historians of early Benedictine women to conclude that the first instances of monastic communities of women following the *Rule of Benedict* were to be found in England where the first great expansion of Benedictine monasticism occurred. The earliest foundations of women following Benedict’s
Rule were the seventh century houses of Folkstone (630), Whitby (657), Minster (670), Ely and Coldingham (673) and Barking (675). These houses represented "no mere temporary experiment, nor was the movement confined to a backwater. In their different ways, the establishments made history."

Most of the early Anglo-Saxon foundations were double monasteries, with men and women relegated to separate buildings. Typically it was the abbess who was the ultimate authority over both houses. As had been the case in Gaul in the preceding centuries, now in England too it was the daughters of the nobility who flocked to the convents. Frequently a princess or a former queen ruled as abbess. Some of the outstanding Anglo-Saxon abbesses of this period who were of noble lineage were Hilda of Whitby (d. 680), Mildred of Minster (d. 700), Etheldreda of Ely (d. 679), Ebba of Coldingham (d. 680), and Cuthburga of Wimborne (d. ca. 720). Barking had as abbesses at least three queens and two princesses.

Clearly, these early Anglo-Saxon convents were at the forefront of everything that affected the life of the people and the English Church. Skilled in the arts of illumination, gold lettering and needlework, as well as learned in theological, scriptural and patristic studies, these earliest of Benedictine women appeared in synods and townsmetings. Their contributions were far from ignored, and often they were called upon to settle disputes. Generally speaking, the first century of Anglo-Saxon Benedictine women was an exceedingly fruitful period. The women who sought admission into the convents were eager candidates for spiritual and intellectual pursuits, as well as being wealthy and of considerable social standing. The fact of their esteemed backgrounds, combined with the wisdom of a way of life according to the Rule of Benedict, resulted in centers of women during this early English period that were "most influential in enabling the Anglo-Saxons to attain a high degree of culture within a hundred years of their conversion to Christianity."

A large number of convents had been founded in the Frankish kingdom of Gaul during the seventh century. Many of them followed the rule of Caesarius, but a larger number of them were bound to the Irish observance of Columban. Well into the century, many of the convents committed to the rule of Columban began to adopt features of the Rule of Benedict, in some cases combining the two rules and creating a new directive for their houses. Other monasteries of both men and women changed over completely
to the Rule of Benedict, enshrining it as the sole norm of their way of life. The most famous houses of Benedictine women in France during the seventh and eighth centuries were in Soissons, Rebais, Pavilly, Paris, Chelles and Jouarre. A growing tendency in the French Benedictine movement of this era was to found communities in urban centers rather than in the country, effectively replacing agricultural activity with works of education and transcription. Prominent urban communities were located in Arles, Bourges, Autun, Rheims and Metz, while rural communities in Boumes-les-Dames, Remiremont, Marchiennes, and Nivelles carried on the earlier work of cultivating the land.

The peak century for Italy in this foundation era of Benedictine women was the eighth. As in France, and in keeping with Italy’s characteristically urban culture, Italian Benedictine convents were founded almost exclusively in cities. The significant difference between these Italian communities and those springing up in France, England, Germany and the Low Countries, was that they were strictly enclosed and contemplative. Here or there a community may have conducted a small school for girls, but for the most part they stood outside the arena of the Church’s educational and cultural life. By the close of the eighth century there were non-agricultural and strictly observant houses of Benedictine women in Milan, Pavia, Venice, Ravenna, Florence, Lucca, Bergamo, Brescia, Turin and Capua. By the close of the ninth century, there were ten Benedictine convents within the city of Rome itself.

The earliest communities of women following the Rule of Benedict were established in Germany after the year 700. The convent of Nonnberg near Salzburg was probably Germany’s first Benedictine convent, having been founded by Bishop Rupert (d.ca. 718), who blessed his niece Ehrentrude as its first abbess. This first foundation in Bavaria was followed by others in Kirchbach (725), Staffelsee (739), Heidenheim (751), Chiemsee (782), and Karlsbach (782). Two famous convents in Trier, Oehren and Pfalzel, also flourished during this eighth-century springtime of Benedictine women in Germany.

The introduction of Anglo-Saxon Benedictine women into Germany by Boniface (680–754), toward the middle of the eighth century, marks the earliest historical event in a long story, one stage of which is the focal interest of this study—the transplantation of Benedictine women from Germany to North America in 1852. There is a direct link between Boniface’s request to Abbess
Tetta of Wimborne in 748, and the founding of St. Walburg Abbey in Eichstätt, Bavaria, in 1035. In 748, Boniface appealed to the Anglo-Saxon Abbess for a group of women to further Benedictine life in the growing Church of Germany. In response to his request, she sent approximately thirty women, among whom were Lioba (d. 780), foundress of Bischofsheim, Thecla (d. 790), the future Abbess of Ochsenfurt, and Walburga (ca. 710–779), who became the Abbess of the famed double monastery of Heidenheim founded by her brother, Wynnebald.

Walburga warrants more than passing attention here, because of her patronal role in the founding of St. Walburg Abbey in Eichstätt, Bavaria, approximately three centuries later. She descended from a noble Anglo-Saxon family, and her ancestral home lay in the South of England in the fertile area around Canterbury. Among Walburga’s relatives were Boniface and Lioba, both of whom would become influential along with her in the Christianization of Germany.

Tradition reports that Walburga was probably sent from home in her early adolescence to be educated at the double Benedictine monastery of Wimborne. Meanwhile, about the year 716, Boniface embarked on a missionary journey from his Anglo-Saxon homeland to Germany. In time, Walburga’s brothers, Willibald and Wynnebald, joined Boniface in his missionary endeavors. Under the leadership of their episcopal relative, Willibald was consecrated Bishop of Eichstätt in 742, and Wynnebald became the founder of the Abbey of Heidenheim in 752. Walburga joined her missionary relatives in the decade between 740 and 750, when she too was called by Boniface to serve in their missionary work in Germany.

Accompanied by still another relative, Lioba, also from the convent of Wimborne, Walburga left her native homeland and crossed over to the continent. There, it is believed, she lived in the convent of Bischofsheim until she was summoned in 761 to the double monastery of Heidenheim which her brother, Wynnebald, had founded. In that same year, Wynnebald died, and Walburga became the abbess of both communities by decree of her other brother, Willibald, Bishop of Eichstätt. She remained in this capacity until her own death in 779.

Walburga was buried in the Abbey Church beside her brother, Wynnebald. After the death of their brother, Willibald, in 787, the Abbey of Heidenheim was transformed into a religious
house of the Eichstätt Chapter for diocesan priests. Walburga’s remains rested there for nearly a century, until they were translated to Eichstätt in the 870’s. Here, from the ninth century until the founding of St. Walburg Abbey in 1035, canonesses maintained the tomb of Walburga, over which the Church of the Holy Cross had been built.

Generally speaking, the women of virtually all of the early German convents were vital contributors in the work of permeating the Germanic peoples with the Christian spirit. “They transmitted the heritage of the faith to the women of the Carolingian era with the same enthusiasm with which they passed on the treasures of ancient civilization.” In Germany as well as in the other major countries of Europe, Benedictine women of the seventh and eighth centuries bore well the task of writing, studying and teaching. At the same time they built a firm foundation for a way of life through which the spirit and values of Benedict would be transmitted to countless generations of women in search of God.

Ninth to Thirteenth Centuries
Expansion and Stabilization

All the countries of Western Christendom had monasteries of women following the Rule of Benedict by the year 1200. As might be expected, they were most numerous and of greatest significance in France and Germany. Nearly all of the early Anglo-Saxon convents had been destroyed during the Danish invasions of the ninth and tenth centuries. It was only after the Norman Conquest of 1066 that some of these convents were restored and other new ones founded in England.

The collapse of the Carolingian Empire was not favorable to the foundation of convents during the ninth and tenth centuries. A few women’s communities of significance founded during these centuries were Andlau in Alsace (884), Altenmünster in Mayence, St. Peter in Metz, St. Mary in Cologne, Vilich in Bonn (986), and Bergen on the Danube. However, the religious zeal fostered by the monks of Cluny and Citeaux during the succeeding centuries manifested itself remarkably in the foundation of new convents.

In the eleventh century St. Walburg in Eichstätt was founded (1035), as were Göss in Styria (1004), Gurk (1043), Neuberg on the
Danube, and Kaufungen in Hessen. In the twelfth century alone, Germany witnessed the founding of one hundred communities of Benedictine women. Significant among them were Rolandswerth (ca. 1126), Gehrden (1135), Willebadessen (1149), Lippoldsberg (ca. 1100), the great Rupertsberg convents of Bingen and Eibingen, founded by Hildegard (1098–1179), and Shōnau in the diocese of Trier, founded by Hildegard’s contemporary, Elizabeth (ca. 1129–1165). 14

In France too, the founding of new convents reached a peak in the twelfth century. While in the tenth century only about ten new foundations had been made, in the twelfth century approximately forty new abbeys and a great number of dependent Cluniac houses were founded. 15 The convent of Marcigny (1061), founded by Hugh of Cluny (d. 1109), is probably the most famous dependent women’s community of the Cluniac system, for it became the pattern for many others of its kind. In fact, its founding set in motion a procedure which was eventually imitated in most countries of Europe until the end of the fourteenth century. In thirteenth-century England, for instance, only twelve new independent abbeys of women were founded, while seventy or more dependent houses dotted the countryside. The most important English abbeys of women during this century were Amesbury, Wilton, Barking and Shaftesburg. 16

The most urgent issues facing Benedictine women of this era fell into two major categories: 1) how to secure their very existence under the pressures flowing from secular powers and economic difficulties, and 2) how life within their houses should be regulated in fidelity to the Rule of Benedict. The Rule gave only general directions and left numerous details to the discretion of the superior. New questions of everyday living and adaptation continually surfaced, and often these matters fell prey to the arbitrary decisions of faithful and not so faithful superiors. It was in response to these issues that the tradition of uniting with monasteries of men and adopting the customs of the great Cluniac abbeys developed. Thus it can be said that most communities of Benedictine women in the eleventh and twelfth centuries lived in the spirit of Cluny. Their way of life was determined not so much by the text of the Rule itself, as by the customs which had evolved and were in some cases far removed from the original spirit of Benedict. The Cluniac ideal stressed the chanting of the Divine Office to which nearly the entire day was devoted. In contrast to
the early Anglo-Saxon and German convents, only a small amount of time was devoted to manual labor. In the area of temporalities, these medieval convents had acquired great possessions which necessitated involvement in the feudal system of the day, as well as participation in governmental affairs. Summarily, the entire structure of medieval Benedictine convents, as well as their increasing associations with the outside world, resulted in a watering down of the Benedictine ideal as it had been lived during the foundation era.17

The fervor of Cistercian renewal in the twelfth century caught on quickly among Benedictine women. The monastic ideal of Citeaux, expressed in retirement from the world, solitude, poverty, manual labor, and a return to the Divine Office chanted in conformity with the prescriptions of the Rule, offered a solution to the issues noted above. In identifying with the Cistercian interpretation of the Rule of Benedict, with its stress on purity of heart rather than on extraordinary austerities, Benedictine women found a firm support in the guidance of the annual general chapter of the new Order, and a secure direction in temporal and spiritual affairs under an abbot appointed by the general chapter. Many communities of women following the Rule of Benedict united with Citeaux. Unlike the Cluniac system, the Cistercian model did not require complete subordination to a central house. Rather, each individual house was assigned to an abbot who exercised custody rather than dominion, and allowed a certain degree of autonomy to the individual house in its day to day observance.

When a Cistercian general chapter at the beginning of the thirteenth century forbade the acceptance of any more convents into the Order, due to the overload of custodial care by the abbots, many Benedictine women adopted the Cistercian way of life without being accepted into the Order. The most celebrated convent of this era to do so was Helfta, the community of Gertrude the Great (1256–ca. 1302), Mechtild of Magdeburg (ca. 1210–1280), and Mechtild of Hackeborn (ca. 1241–1298).18 In time, the movement of Cistercian women overshadowed Benedictine women of the old observance. By the fifteenth century, Germany alone had 115 communities of Benedictine women and 220 houses of women belonging to the Order of Citeaux.19
Fourteenth to Sixteenth Centuries
Decline and Reform

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the old way of life according to the Rule of Benedict, which had been nearly the only decisive force in the development of European cultural and ascetic life for over half a millennium, gave way to the rapidly growing new religious ideal of the mendicant orders. The decline of the old monastic ideal dramatically influenced the tradition of Benedictine women being surveyed here. The economic, religious, and cultural decline within houses of Benedictine women during these centuries was so pervasive that “many Benedictine convents scarcely deserved the name of religious institutes.” Thus, women seeking to dedicate their lives to Jesus Christ now flocked to Franciscan, Dominican and Cistercian convents where the old ideals of contemplation and cultural development were held in high esteem.

Hilpisch cites three main reasons for the decline in houses of Benedictine women during this period: 1) economic crises related to the abuses of the feudal system, 2) decline in membership resulting in the exclusive acceptance of women of nobility, and 3) the increasing secularization of the order of canonesses whose manner of life became the pattern and model emulated by many Benedictine houses. Endless feuds over money and possessions, minimal spiritual fervor among noble ladies of idleness, and the widespread adoption of a secular life style characterized Benedictine communities of this era. Many Benedictine houses even resorted to the payment of a stipend to the Roman Curia in exchange for the permission to become institutes of canonesses. Such a fate befell the once esteemed Benedictine foundations of Baume-les-Dames and Remiremont in France, Hohenburg and Othmarsheim in Alsace, and Kaufugen in Hessen.

As a consequence of this decline, the population of Benedictine convents during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was very small. Most German, French, and English houses averaged eight or ten members, some even less. In addition, the Black Plague reduced already dwindling memberships and the Hundred Years’ War brought plunder and chaos to houses condemned to a wretched existence. In England and France there were houses in which only one or two nuns remained, and in France many convents died out completely. The old monastic
obsequance was virtually non-existent in convents which had once been shining models of a way of life according to the Rule of Benedict. Instead, private ownership, individual meals in place of the common table, installation in choir rather than profession of vows, abandoned enclosure, and worldly clothing, characterized women who retained the label "Benedictine" only in name.22

The decline among Benedictine women reached its lowest ebb at the beginning of the fifteenth century, just when the great reform movements among Benedictine men were taking shape—the Cassinese reform in Italy, the Bursfeld renewal in Germany, and the Claustrales revival in Spain. One of the legacies of the first century of the Cistercian movement to traditional monasticism had been the concept of "a federation of equal autonomous houses, domestically independent and with an abbot who had an equal voice with all other abbots in framing decrees and passing judgments binding upon all." Sovereign power resided in the totality of abbots in the general chapter. So successful had been the two disciplinary and administrative measures of annual general chapter and annual visitation among the Cistercians, that at the Fourth Council of the Lateran (1215) Pope Innocent III imposed these reforms upon all monks and regular canons. However, this mandate had been "largely ignored in continental Europe." By 1400, "there was in Europe as a whole far less congregational activity than the Lateran Council had decreed."24

Within a few decades after the turn of the fifteenth century, the congregational model was seized upon as a vehicle for much needed reform in medieval monasteries. Spurred on by additional conciliar decrees, notably that of the Council of Constance (1414–1418), new congregations of men’s monasteries formed in relatively quick succession. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the most influential programs of congregational reform were in place, and women’s communities were beginning to participate in some of the new congregations founded within the Benedictine family. Some houses of women affiliated with the English Congregation, the German Bursfeld Congregation, and the model Italian Congregation of Sta Giustina, later to be named the Cassinese Congregation. Benedictine women in Spain allied themselves with the Valladolid and Claustrales congregations in which there was strong emphasis on strict enclosure for both men and women. It is important to note, however, that the congregational system of governance was never applied to women’s houses as an
organizational principle. Rather, their affiliation with congre­
gations of men simply meant that the women's convents followed
the constitutions of the congregations. "Moreover, the convents
lost their independence and were subject to spiritual direction
and visitation by the abbot president of the congregation." 25

Despite the apparent loss of individual autonomy, houses of
Benedictine women benefited greatly by participation in the fif­
teenth-century reform movements. Many communities experi­
enced a surge of new life after years and decades of decline. The
reform provided for the convents not only a renewed manner of
life, but also a welcome guarantee of security. In general, the re­
forming abbots did not set out to forge a new monastic ideal in
the convents under their care, but were intent upon removing the
abuses which had become so commonplace—private ownership,
separate living and neglect of the enclosure. The essentials of mo­
nastic observance reinstated were the communal life, the choir
service, poverty, and a moderate asceticism. In most cases the old
organization of the convents was preserved, permitting each
house a certain independence. What the congregation provided
was the firm guidance of the abbot visitator and the general chap­
ter. Most especially in Germany and France, Benedictine life
among women flourished anew in houses that had earlier tottered
on the brink of ruin. 26

Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries
Dissolution and Revival

There is a sense in which it can be said that the fifteenth-century
reform of medieval convents was too late in coming to withstand
the events of the Protestant Reformation. While some historians
over the years have taken the position that the reformers, who ex­
posed the abuses of the monastic system, were responsible for its
near demise, it is important to view the situation of monastic life
in the sixteenth century in less simplistic terms. The closing of
monasteries and convents might be more accurately viewed as
the result of forces which had been at work for some time. By the
beginning of the sixteenth century, monasticism had already suf­
fered serious internal breakdown, at the same time that the very
groundwork of medieval strength and achievement was giving
way to massive change that would remold society on an altered
basis. Even if Benedictine communities of women had been left undisturbed during the Reformation, it is unlikely that they could have sustained the energy and momentum of the late fifteenth-century reform movement.

It is understating the reality to say that Benedictine convents were seriously affected by the early events of the Reformation period. First to experience the impact, many German convents were plundered or completely destroyed during the peasants' uprising from 1524–1526. Those of southern and middle Germany suffered particularly heavy losses, among them the renowned convent of Helfta. In some cases community life ended not from the use of brutal force, but as a result of property confiscation and a ruling that forbade the reception of novices. The resistance of the nuns was so great, that in most of these instances they chose to become wards of the state, rather than to disband and leave the premises. Consequently, the state incorporation of the property and the actual closing of the convent took place only after the last abbess or nun died. 27

The consequence of Reformation events in virtually all the countries of Europe was bitter. In Germany, seventy-six abbeys and seven priories of Benedictine women were destroyed, as were 137 abbeys of Cistercian nuns. By 1539, England no longer had a single Benedictine convent. At the turn of the century England had still had eighty-four Benedictine houses with a total population of 850 women. In less than forty years, nine hundred years of Benedictinism among women in England was wiped out. Benedictine convents in other European countries suffered a similar fate, and by the year 1540 it appeared that Benedictinism had been snuffed out all over Europe. In some countries of northern Europe, the subsequent revival of monasticism would never again regain a foothold.

The revival of Benedictine convents that took place under the reform mandates of the Council of Trent (1545–1563) reflected well the fundamental societal shift that had accompanied the tumultuous Reformation events. The foundation for revival efforts seemed no longer to be the medieval monastic ideal—that is, the restoration of regular discipline by way of a literal observance of the Rule of Benedict. Rather, the revival was characterized much more by the “formation of a living piety from the spirit of the Catholic Restoration” as a whole. 28 It is true that the Rule remained an important ingredient of the post-Reformation revival,
but it was only the foundation upon which the new religious ideals of the time found expression.

The Council of Trent had set the direction for reform according to certain non-negotiable mandates: 1) the introduction of strict enclosure with complete seclusion from the world, 2) selective acceptance of novices, 3) the inauguration of a year of probation before vows, 4) the admittance to profession of only those candidates who were sixteen or older, and 5) the observance of asceticism in accord with the practices of piety prevalent at that time. The last mandate resulted in the introduction of austerities and penitential practices hitherto unknown in Benedictine observance. Abbesses and newly formed Benedictine communities were guided by the great spiritual teachers of the era—Francis de Sales, Cardinal Pierre de Berulle—and the Orders that were avant-garde in the Counter Reformation, the Jesuits, Capuchins and Oratorians.

Benedictine monks of the post-Reformation period appeared to disassociate themselves from the revival taking hold in communities of women, and left the work of spiritual direction to the newer orders of men. One of the great Benedictine reform congregations of this era, the Maurist Congregation, flatly refused to take communities of women into their union. The result was predictable. The spiritual formation of new candidates to Benedictine life moved further and further away from the Benedictine tradition of old, and enthusiastically embraced the ascetical teachings of the new spiritual masters. Consequently, the central concern of the revival convents was not the introduction of a more faithful following of the spirit of the Rule of Benedict and its tradition. Rather, the first concern was for the interior life, the life of union with God, the mystical life. The emphasis had shifted from conversion within a community context to the way of self-perfection. Meditation was considered of utmost importance and accompanied the chanting of the Divine Office. Jesuit teachers were engaged by the convents to teach the practice of meditative prayer, and Jesuit-directed retreats became a common vehicle of instruction.

Catholic France was foremost among the European countries in the revival of Benedictine convents and congregations in the period of the Catholic restoration. Between 1590 and 1700 France again became a land of convents. The revival was not restricted to the restoration of pre-Reformation monasteries stemming from
the eighth century, but led to the foundation of two new congregations of Benedictine women—the Benedictine Congregation of Calvary (Poitiers, 1617), committed to meditation on the Passion of Christ, and the Benedictine Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament and Perpetual Adoration (Paris, 1653). 31

German participation in the post-Reformation renascence of Benedictine life among women took a slightly different course. 32 Generally speaking, however, the Council of Trent had brought an inner renewal to German convents as it had to the French. German revival was most clearly evidenced in the statutes drawn up for German houses by the papal visitator, Felician Ninguarda (d. 1595). After completing a series of visitations to Bavarian Benedictine women’s communities, he found no great abuses but concluded that the “mild observance” he witnessed in these houses was not in keeping with the ascetical requirements and ideals of the reforms of Trent. Consequently, he issued a set of statutes aimed at regulating life in these convents according to the spirit of the older traditions and the new ideals of the Order. Given first to the convent at Kübach in the diocese of Augsburg (1590), these statutes were eventually transmitted to Hohenwart, Holzen and Fulda (1630). Similar statutes went to Geisenfeld (1589), Nonnberg, Chiemsee (1626), and to St. Walburg Abbey in Eichstätt (1644). 33

In Italy, the revival of Benedictine convents resulted in their union with the Cassinese Congregation and the regulation of their monastic life according to the Cassinese constitutions. England witnessed its first restored Benedictine convent in 1597, and reform constitutions were issued in Spain in 1615. The new flowering of Benedictine convents in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation reached its peak around the year 1700.

Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries
Decline and New Life

It was not blatant corruption that caused the eighteenth century decline in European houses of Benedictine women. Rather, decline was due to a gradual diminishment of strength and purpose. The religious disintegration of the Enlightenment era affected the life of the whole Church, and convent walls were not impervious to religious lassitude.
In France, a paradoxical mixture of unwholesome austerities regarding the Sacrament of Penance and the reception of Eucharist, and certain laxities in other areas of monastic observance disrupted the balance and moderation inherent in a faithful following of the Rule of Benedict. Undoubtedly, the religious ascetical life was greatly hindered by the internal strife of Jansenism now at its peak.

In the restored convents of Italy and Spain monastic observance waned, lacking proper guidance and motivation. A good number of German convents were preoccupied with their status as imperial and princely institutions, and allowed secular concerns to penetrate their religious way of life.34

The secular spirit of the Enlightenment resulted in a vast decline in membership in most European Benedictine convents. In many German convents the membership was scarcely thirty, with still fewer in Italian and Spanish houses. The French convent at Caderousse declined to a membership of two by 1761, and was not unique in this circumstance.

The slow, steady, but relatively quiet decline in Benedictine convents during the first eighty years of the eighteenth century climaxed in yet another blow of devastation and ruin thrust upon them by political and anti-religious forces beyond their control. It has been estimated that at the outbreak of the French Revolution, western and central Europe had more than one thousand Benedictine monasteries of men and at least fifteen hundred convents. Some fifty years after the Napoleonic era ended, monasteries of men numbered about fifty, with the figure remaining only a little higher in the case of Benedictine convents.35

Predictably, the French Revolution was most devastating to Benedictine life in France. Convents and monasteries were plundered, robbed, partially destroyed or completely devastated. The number of Benedictine men and women who suffered death, imprisonment, or exile approximated 1,114.36

The consequences of the French Revolution were not confined to France. Benedictine convents in Germany suffered a bitter fate due to the widespread conquests of Napoleon. A state decree in 1803 called for the dissolution of all convents with an imperial or princely rank, and the properties of all others without rank were given over as compensations to the German princes for their losses. Some convents in Austria, Switzerland, and a few in Germany withstood the general destruction, but were doomed to
eking out a bare existence which scarcely resembled monastic life in the traditional sense.

The secularization of 1803 also extended into Poland, Italy, Spain and Portugal. At the turn of the nineteenth century, only a few Benedictine convents remained in Europe as witnesses to a tradition that had weathered some 1,300 years of monumental ups and downs.

The resiliency of the Benedictine impulse was again borne out by an unexpected resurgence of Benedictine life all over Europe within less than thirty years after the decree of secularization. This era of new life for European Benedictine women is the immediate context for the story of American transplantation. The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed the revival of old convents, the establishment of new ones according to the traditional monastic ideal, the formation of new congregations, and the transplantation of the Benedictine way of life not only to America, but to Australia and Africa as well.

The seemingly indestructible vitality of the Benedictine spirit made its comeback first in those convents stemming from the old period. The venerable old convent of Nonnberg near Salzburg, influenced by the new wave of Catholic romanticism, embarked upon an inner renewal that resulted in the transmission of a new spark of life to other places. Some of the old Bavarian convents rose again under the patronage of King Ludwig I—Frauenwörth in Chiemsee, St. Walburg in Eichstätt, and Tettenweis in lower Bavaria. In Switzerland also, new life stirred in the convents of Sarnen and Fahr.

Many of the old Benedictine convents continued their earlier observances. Others accepted a new vision of life according to Benedict fostered by two new and influential monastic congregations—that of Solesmes in France, founded by Prosper Guéranger (1805–1875), and Beuron, founded by Maurus Wolter (1825–1890). Both of these congregations had a particular interest in founding convents that would participate in their goal of renewing monasticism by joining the essential elements of the Rule of Benedict with the oldest historical traditions.

The Cassinese congregation in Italy also made a formidable comeback, identifying itself as “of the primitive observance” and characterized by a strictly common life with the midnight office and the traditional fasts. In France, there arose two new congregations of Benedictine women—the Benedictine nuns of the Heart of
Mary founded by Marie Thérèse de Bavoiz (d. 1883), and the congregation of Missionary Benedictine Nuns founded by Dom J. M. Besse of Ligugé and Madame Waddington-Delmas at Vanves. The earlier congregations of Calvary and Perpetual Adoration also recovered from the effect of the French Revolution and enjoyed a great expansion.38

A new way of ordering life according to the Rule of Benedict was evidenced in the number of communities of “sisters” that came into existence in the nineteenth century—Maria Rickenbach in Switzerland (1857), Benedictine Sisters of the Good Samaritan in Australia (1857), Benedictine Sisters of the Poor in France (1872), Benedictine Adorers of the Heart of Jesus in Tyburn and Montmartre (1897), Missionary Sisters of Tutzing, Germany (1885), and the Oblate Sisters of St. Benedict in Belgium (1904). All of these communities, in one way or another, were unceloistered attempts to live a Benedictine life of contemplation combined with external works of charity.39

To press forward into greater detail about these later nineteenth-century developments would be to move too far ahead of the story which occupies the remaining chapters of this book. It is the story of one particular and venerable house of Benedictine women in Bavaria, which during the nineteenth-century Benedictine resurgence dared to plant the spirit of Benedict of Nursia in the New World.

**Nine Hundred Years in Eichstätt, Bavaria**

St. Walburg Abbey40 in Eichstätt, Bavaria, is a particular personification of nine hundred of the 1400 years of Benedictinism among women surveyed above. Having been founded during the eleventh and twelfth-century flowering of Benedictinism among women, it lived on to match within itself the cycles of decline and reform which were so characteristic of the general history of Benedictine women from the thirteenth through the nineteenth centuries.41

When St. Walburg Abbey was founded in Eichstätt in 1035, the new community was constituted from several sources. The
core group was composed of canonesses, generations of whom had been living near the tomb of Walburga ever since her remains had been solemnly translated from Heidenheim to Eichstätt in 870. A second component included nuns from Germany’s oldest Benedictine convent, the Abbey of Holy Mary and St. Erentrud in Nonnberg, near Salzburg. In addition to these, the Bishop of Eichstätt recruited women from the neighboring houses of Neuburg, Bergen, and Monheim, houses founded in the ninth and tenth centuries. Reportedly, one of the first observances adopted by the new community was the chanting of the Divine Office as prescribed in the Rule of Benedict. However, the “first few years were difficult ones since the house and the church were still under construction and religious life in the convent was in its formative state.”

The initiative for the founding of St. Walburg’s came from the German Count, Leodegar, of Lechsgmünd and Graisbach. The suggestion had come to him from Bishop Heribert of Eichstätt (1022–1042), who visited him during a serious illness. In discovering that the Count wished to dedicate his possessions to some project of the Church, Bishop Heribert suggested a Benedictine convent at the tomb of Walburga. Thus, the document of founding drawn up on July 25, 1035, read as follows:

In the name of the Holy and Undivided Trinity let all Christian believers know how a man of noble lineage, whose name is Luitger [Leodegar] and who from his youth yearned for heavenly things, wanted to make God the heir to his earthly possessions by founding a convent for virgins on land belonging to these earthly possessions and in a place that seemed to him especially well suited. . . . With the consent and according to the wish of Bishop Heribert . . . he selected the Church of St. Walburga, which is situated on a small hill near the city walls of Eichstätt and which was built there many years ago and renovated by Bishop Heribert. . . . At this time the niece of Luitger, Imma, was blessed as first Abbess here. She was a woman who led a venerable life, proved herself with good works, and had been strengthened by the teaching of Abbess Ita in the Abbey of Holy Mary and St. Erentrud in Salzburg. . . .

Leodegar endowed the new foundation generously, while Bishop Heribert added to the original endowment the property formerly belonging to the canonesses, plus two farms and a vineyard from his own estate. Under the Bishop’s direction a church and convent were built upon the foundation of the little Church of the Holy Cross and the property belonging to the canonesses.
In October of 1042 the church was consecrated, not by Bishop Heribert who had died in July of that year, but by his brother who succeeded him as bishop. The founder, Leodegar, lived to see his work prosper for forty years. After his illness in 1035, he became a priest and a canon of the Cathedral of Eichstätt. Following his death in 1074, he was buried in the church of St. Walburga and venerated there for centuries to come.

The first few centuries of St. Walburg’s existence are historically obscure. What has been said about the general state of Benedictine convents from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries applies here. The customs of the great Cluniac abbeys had infiltrated Benedictine houses of women as well, and fidelity to the prescriptions of the Rule of Benedict was questionable. The material possessions of St. Walburg’s increased greatly, and most of the abbesses belonged to the nobility of Eichstätt. According to custom, they were elected by the community Chapter, but confirmed in their office by the bishop.45

By the fifteenth century, St. Walburg’s was no exception to the widespread decline of discipline occurring in Benedictine houses of women and men alike. The old monastic traditions of the house had been affected by the spirit of the times and there was little concern for poverty and obedience. “The convent resembled in many respects an institute for fashionable women of the world rather than a spiritual family according to the mind of Benedict.”46

At this juncture in their history, the Benedictine women in Eichstätt were significantly influenced by the Rhineland reform of Benedictine monastic life under the leadership of Abbot John Rode (d. 1439) in Trier. He prepared reform statutes for the convent of Marienberg at Boppard, which eventually found their way to St. Walburg’s under the impetus of Johann von Eych, Bishop of Eichstätt (1445–1464).47

In 1451, Bishop von Eych inaugurated a series of reforms at St. Walburg’s, including a stricter enclosure and an interpretation of poverty which put an end to private ownership.48 The reforms met with bitter resistance from the nuns themselves, as well as from the nobility of the surrounding area, who eventually registered their complaints in Rome. However, Pope Callistus III supported the Bishop in his reform efforts to restore regular discipline, not only at St. Walburg’s but throughout his entire diocese. With the support of Rome behind him, Bishop von Eych deposed
Abbess Elizabeth von Seckendorf in 1456, and summoned Sophia von Kölleda-Spiegel from the Benedictine monastery of Marienberg to be abbess. The new Abbess was imbued with the spirit of reform begun by Abbot John Rode in the community of her profession, and managed to restore the old traditions of St. Walburg’s. Reportedly, the deposed abbess accepted her authority and many others followed that example. Those who refused to abide by the reform measures left. Under Abbess Sophia (1456–1475), the community doubled in size and strengthened its observance, factors which presumably enabled the community to weather the years of the Protestant Reformation without suffering a major decline.

The sources are silent about the state of St. Walburg Abbey after the Peasants’ Revolt (1524–1526) and the subsequent dissolution of monasteries and convents across the face of Europe. It is difficult to believe that the convent “passed through the trying years of the so-called Reformation without suffering any of its ill effects.” If, indeed, it escaped the worst ravages of the dissolution, it was due to the fact that “in Germany the breaking up of the tradition was varied in its manner and effect according to beliefs subscribed to in different areas. . . . Anti-monastic forces had to rely . . . on a local feeling which was liable to shift completely into reverse on the accession of a new duke, landgrave, or prince. Persecution in Germany was accordingly a switchback affair, reaction following reaction, and neither the persecutors nor the persecuted knowing quite where they stood.”

The first thirty years of the seventeenth century appear to have been prosperous years. With the support of Johann Christoph von Westerstetten, a well disposed and generous bishop appointed to Eichstätt in 1612, Abbess Eugenia Thürmeier began the construction of a new church in 1629 on the site of the old one which had been built by Bishop Heribert in the eleventh century. She did not live to see its consecration on October 12, 1634.

By this time Europe was in the grip of the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), struggling for a balance of power between the Austrian Habsburgs and the German princes. The warring reached the city of Eichstätt in 1633. Swedish troops entered the city, demanding a tax in return for military protection. St. Walburg Abbey contributed its share of the tax and received a letter promising protection. Their security was tentative, however, for off and on between March and December of 1633, the community had to
flee the convent to take refuge in a city fortress while the Swedish troops made their way through the city burning and plundering. St. Walburg's escaped destruction only temporarily, until the "seven days of horror" commenced on February 6, 1634.

On that day Swedish soldiers took the convent by force and remained within its walls for seven days. Scholastica Peisserin, Prioress at the time, recorded the horrors of those days in the convent chronicle:

... the Lady Abbess [Eugenia Thürmeier] lay dying. At seven o'clock at night the Swedes, with great might, stormed the city and forced an entrance into our convent just when we, in deep sorrow, were gathered in the room of the dying Lady Abbess. These ruffians fell upon us with drawn swords and howled like ravening wolves among sheep. One of the soldiers jumped upon the chest of the dead abbess. She would have died again had that been possible. ... Several of the nuns, terrified, ran into the river Edel and remained there for twenty-four hours. It is impossible now to write everything we suffered. From Monday until Sunday these soldiers surrounded us night and day and plundered throughout the convent. On Sunday about one o'clock in the morning, they set fire to the convent and town. O, what heart-rending sorrow there was then. 54

The fire in the convent was quickly extinguished by the convent baker, and the church was spared as well. The new Abbess, Helena Katharina Gross von Trockau-Zeulenreuth (1634-1651), and several other women were taken as prisoners to Regensburg where they were held for bail. To secure the bail money, the convent pawned some of the smaller treasures of the church and a large silver lamp. After fourteen days of imprisonment, the Abbess and her companions returned and "without delay began to repair the ruined and despoiled convent," with money obtained from the Benedictine monastery of Admont in Steiermark and funds procured through begging. 55

The reconstruction of the convent took twelve years. While it was going on the nuns who had survived the Swedish invasion found lodging wherever they could in the town and at Ingolstadt. They embarked on many begging tours during those years—to Ingolstadt, Kelham, Waissenburg, Lintz, Munich and Vienna. 56 By 1646, the reconstruction was far enough along for the nuns to move in and begin anew the way of life to which they were committed by their religious profession. The remainder of the seventeenth century was characterized by the work of "beautification and expansion." This "turbulent century gave the house its external form as well as [an] interior spirit of self-sacrifice and mutual
The exterior beautification of the Abbey was promoted through the generous benefactions of two bishops from the house of Schenk-Castell, whose Eichstätt episcopacies spanned the last half of the seventeenth century. The abbesses who followed them carried on the work of restoration and enhancement which their funds had made possible. Under Cordula Litzler (1677–1704), Barbara Schmaus (1705–1730) and Adelgundis Pettenkofer (1730–1756), the church and convent renovations were completed, the farm buildings were rebuilt, a guest house and priest department were added, and the liturgy was enhanced with reiche Paramenten and die figurierte Musik. It was Abbess Barbara Schmaus who was particularly intent upon promoting the special devotion to St. Walburga, and making available to those who visited her shrine the holy “oil” believed to issue from the wall of the tomb at certain times of the year. Abbess Adelgundis Pettenkofer was responsible for the church tower with its guilded, life-sized statue of St. Walburga above the cupola.

The interior spirit of the house took shape, after 1644, according to the statutes of Kübach which epitomized the impulse of Tridentine reform. In keeping with the old cenobitic monastic ideal, the statutes began with an exhortation regarding the priority of the Divine Office:

First the religious service to which, according to the teaching of our holy father St. Benedict, nothing is to be preferred, is to be performed devoutly in choir and elsewhere, with propriety, with complete words, with long pauses, with distinct syllables, with uniform voice, not one high, another low, in singing, reading and chanting.

Due to the poverty and severe hardships of convent life during the Thirty Years’ War, the custom of praying Matins at midnight had been dropped in many houses. Since this was also the case at St. Walburg’s, the community rose at approximately four o’clock in the morning to pray Matins. The conventual Mass was celebrated at about eight or nine o’clock, followed by the midday meal. Vespers was chanted about two or three o’clock in the afternoon, followed by supper around five or six o’clock. Compline was prayed immediately after supper, followed by the night rest.

At the same time that the Kübach statutes appealed to ancient monastic custom, they also incorporated the new ideals of Tridentine reform. Private prayer or meditation was introduced...
The Reshaping of a Tradition

as a required component of daily prayer. Its inspiration was to be drawn from ascetical writings of the day. An annual retreat was also required, specified as follows in the statutes of St. Walburg’s:

Yearly in the summer time the nuns shall undertake a three day collecting and assembling of the spirit and perform the spiritual exercises under the direction of a priest of the Society of Jesus. According to the decrees of the Council of Trent, the Künach statutes also demanded that women in Benedictine houses go to confession every two weeks and receive communion once a month. Ordinarily it was the confessor of the house who also chose the material for table reading and determined the topics for daily meditation.

The incorporation of Tridentine reform resulted in a ritual of solemn clothing hitherto unknown in houses of Benedictine women. In the Rule of Benedict the novice received the clothing of the monastery at the time of professing stability, conversion and obedience. Since the Council of Trent strictly demanded a period of novitiate, a new rite of solemn clothing became customary at the beginning of the novitiate. Since women coming to the convent during this period tended to be of the noble class, entrance into the novitiate came to be ritualized in a dramatic denunciation of the world and earthly pomp. In characteristically Baroque fashion, “the novice appeared in all her finery, escorted by a great retinue, placed everything before the altar, and then in the garb of the order, in which she was clothed before the altar [by the abbess, or a prelate if increased solemnity was desired], made her entrance into the convent.” A further innovation at the clothing ritual was the bestowing of a special monastic name, preceded by the name “Mary,” in keeping with Marian piety of the time.

The greatest problem of the Künach statutes for German convents was the strict enclosure required by Trent. There had been no tradition for this in Germany, since many of the abbesses belonged to the Reichstag, and freely departed from the convent for business as well as social engagements. But on this issue the papal visitators had been adamant. Thus, Benedictine convents of the time were subjected to minute directives about which doors or windows needed to be walled up, and each departure from the enclosure required the permission of the bishop.

The Künach statutes were comprehensive, including prescriptions relative to work, meals, table reading, times of silence versus conversation, recreation and the strict abandonment of
private property. The pervasive influence of these statutes resulted in a tightly regulated way of life at St. Walburg Abbey, at least for the remainder of the seventeenth century.

If St. Walburg’s experienced any aspects of the slow and steady decline characteristic of Benedictine convents during the eighteenth century the sources are silent about it. Typically, the German convents experienced a high degree of imperial and princely status during this century and it is possible that the secular concerns which affected their way of life simply were not perceived as features of decline. In fact, one historian clearly reports that when Abbess Adelgundis Pettenkofer died in 1756, St. Walburg’s “stood in high repute,” and further asserts that “this peaceful steady development” continued for the next fifty years. 64

The French Revolution broke out within those next fifty years, and St. Walburg Abbey escaped the immediate devastation of that event. As Napoleon’s power increased throughout Europe, however, the German princes courted his favor. Agreeing to concede the left bank of the Rhine to France, the right bank was awarded to the dispossessed German princes by the Treaty of Luneville (1801). Under this same treaty the city of Eichstätt was annexed to Bavaria, although it still belonged to Austria. As a reward for Bavaria’s loyalty, Napoleon raised the country to a Kingdom, dubbing its Elector, Maximilian I, as King. This turn of events was disastrous for the church of Germany, and directly affected the community of Benedictine women in Eichstätt.

Maximilian’s chief minister, Montgelas, was hostile toward the Church. Without delay, he put an end to spiritual principalities and ecclesiastical possessions, assigned the revenues of bishoprics and cathedral chapters to lay princes, and by a series of secularization decrees (1802 and 1803), gave over to the free disposal of the respective rulers, all property belonging to abbeys and monasteries of both men and women. This dispossession of Church property was carried out ruthlessly and with wanton destruction. According to some estimates, the secularization of Bavaria affected about 3000 monks and 2000 nuns. 65

For a time St. Walburg’s escaped the consequences of the decrees of 1802 and 1803. But in 1805, when the city of Eichstätt was officially brought into the domain of Maximilian, the convent passed into the hands of the government. Abbess Michaela Morasch (1799–1826) ruled at the time, and deserves more than passing mention in this story. One historian reports that during
the precarious period from 1802–1806 she negotiated with government officials to allow herself, eighteen choir nuns, and fifteen lay sisters to continue their community life in the secularized convent. She wasted no time in making friends with Bavarian rulers. On special feasts and namedays of important people she wrote letters and sent Walburga oil as gifts. She was especially kind to Josephine, Napoleon’s wife, and through her influence hoped to assure the benevolence of Napoleon.66

In 1804 the government demanded that the convent open a school for girls. Abbess Michaela refused due to a lack of qualified teachers, but conceded to have the nuns teach needlework and handicrafts. Heroic though her efforts were, the nuns were given notice to disband in 1806. Upon refusing to leave, each member was questioned individually by a government official and given the option of returning to her family or living in the closed convent under a government pension.

Abbess Michaela and those nuns who chose to remain were allowed to live in the convent as wards of the government until they died out. Their possessions were confiscated, they were forbidden to receive novices, and their daily schedule and routine was set up and monitored by government officials. Their horarium, once sanctified by the various prayer times of the Divine Office, was reduced to a 5:00 a.m. rising time, an 11:00 a.m. noon meal, and supper at 5:30.

In spite of this sorry state of monastic life to which the community had been reduced, Abbess Michaela remained undaunted. In time, she found out that nuns in other secularized convents were receiving higher pensions, and wasted no time in obtaining the same for her charges—not just once, but in 1807, 1809, 1817 and 1818.67

Abbess Michaela Morasch died during the period of secularization, on May 23, 1826. One account records that leadership was passed on to Willibaldia Schmittner (1826–1836), who had been subprioress during the years of disorganization.68 Within two months of Abbess Michaela’s death, King Ludwig I of Bavaria informed the remaining nuns of his intent to restore their convent. Although a nine year delay ensued over the question of funds for the renovation, a promise of new life awaited King Ludwig’s official Decree of Restoration on June 7, 1835.

As early as 1817 Maximilian’s son, Ludwig had persuaded his father to dismiss Montgelas, whose tactics he despised.
Maximilian obliged his son, but little changed in terms of the state’s power over the Church. Even though the concordat of 1817, which dismissed Montgelas, had also promised the restoration of some convents and monasteries at state expense, nothing concrete happened until Maximilian died in 1825 and left the throne to Ludwig.

King Ludwig I was the most cultured ruler in nineteenth-century Europe and was ambitious to have peace restored in his country. His overall goal was to unite political liberalism with Catholic thought and reform. To further this goal he extended his support to an emerging Catholic scholarship in Germany, particularly at the University of Munich, and took some specific steps toward the revival of monastic life.

When in 1826 King Ludwig’s Cabinet refused to assume the expenses for the renovation of St. Walburg’s in Eichstatt, he allowed the matter to rest only temporarily. On August 24, 1831, he wrote the following to Edward von Shenk, President of the Cabinet:

The Cabinet has proposed to me that the monastery of St. Walburg not be allowed to continue its existence. I am not underrating the difficulties which present themselves in maintaining this convent, but just the same, in consideration of its great antiquity, I desire that its continuance be made possible.

The problem of financial support was addressed in the early 1830’s when the government posed three options to the women of St. Walburg’s. They would be allowed to reopen their convent and restore community life on the condition that they could support themselves by 1) seeking revenue through votive stands and selling the oil of St. Walburga, or 2) by reopening the brewery they once managed, or 3) by assuming teaching responsibilities in Eichstätt’s school for girls. In response to the first option Willibaldia Schmittner wrote:

The holy oil of St. Walburga is not sold, nor ever was sold, and it never entered our minds, and I hope it will never enter the minds of our successors, either to seek or to find in the dispensing of this holy oil of St. Walburga a temporal advantage.

In response to reopening the brewery she was equally decisive.

The working of the brewery was a real service only at that time when the monastery was in its full vigor. . . . [now] for the people of Eichstätt there are enough breweries within and without the city, so that it is neither necessary nor advantageous to start a new one.
The community's decision in favor of the third option was expressed in a petition to King Ludwig dated July 10, 1834. The king's approval and official Decree of Restoration was published on June 7, 1835, in the following words: "We have felt ourselves impelled to grant the continued existence of the monastery of St. Walburg at Eichstätt, of the Order of St. Benedict."

The amazing resiliency of the ancient charism of Benedict proved itself once again, for within the short span of approximately four months after Ludwig's Decree, the community of thirteen women who had survived the period of secularization invested three new novices. The following chapter of this study will resume the story of St. Walburg Convent and its mission to America. That story must be suspended now in the interest of surveying the American Church context at the point of its intersection with the history of Bavarian Benedictine women.

**Nineteenth-Century American Church Context**

When the female branch of the Benedictine Order was introduced in America by three women from St. Walburg Convent, Eichstätt (1852), the American Catholic Church was undergoing a fundamental transformation from a colonial institution into an immigrant church. In 1789 when John Carroll (1735-1815) became America's first bishop, his diocese of Baltimore was coterminal with the entire United States—the land between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mississippi River, and from Canada and the Great Lakes to the northern boundary of Florida westward to the Mississippi. Thirty priests served approximately forty thousand Catholics without the aid of a single order of religious women. Sixty-three years later, when thirty-two bishops assembled for the First Plenary Council of Baltimore in May of 1852, the number of American Catholics was close to two million, with approximately 1,420 priests spread throughout six archdioceses and twenty-five dioceses. Eight permanent communities of women religious had been established to minister to the growing needs of a burgeoning Catholic population.

It was during the 1830's, the years of restoration at St. Walburg's in Eichstätt, that the character of the American church
shifted dramatically from an Anglo-American church into a church of European immigrants. The enormity and pace of change experienced by the American church during the 1830’s, 1840’s and 1850’s accounts in large part for the vulnerable position in which American Catholicism found itself by the middle of the nineteenth century. The American Catholic Church, into which Benedictine women from Bavaria were inserted in 1852 was a minority religion over against American Protestantism, was plagued by the traditional prejudice which most Americans had for Catholicism, was conspicuous due to its predominantly foreign cast, was becoming increasingly separate from the non-Catholic population, drawing in upon itself, was Democratic in its political alignment, and was populating the poorer class of Americans employed in the rising industrial towns of the East and Middle West. Ironically, however, “by the time the United States entered the second half of the century, the most disliked and suspect of all the American churches was on the way to becoming the largest and strongest single denomination in the land.”

Precisely how and to what extent pioneer Benedictine women were influenced and reshaped in their way of life by the transformation occurring within the American Catholic Church during the latter half of the nineteenth century, is the primary question to be considered in the remaining chapters of this book. The final task of this chapter is to set the American stage, the backdrop against which the story in chapters two, three and four will unfold. Since a comprehensive treatment of the American context is outside the scope of this chapter, four specific aspects of the setting immediately relevant to the story of American Benedictine women from 1852–1881 will be considered.

Rise of American Catholic Sisterhoods

The first permanent establishment of nuns in the territory which was to become the continental United States, was made 125 years before Benedictine women from Eichstätt arrived to transplant their tradition on American soil. Nine French Ursulines came to New Orleans in 1727 to take charge of a hospital run by the Company of the Indies. In addition to their work in the hospital, they
also taught school, were asked to take charge of women and girls needing custodial care, instructed African and Native Americans, and cared for orphans. America greeted these nuns and their work cordially and with great admiration. Apparently the nuns themselves experienced little cultural clash with their environment, since the people among whom they worked were of the same French culture as themselves.

In spite of such a seemingly successful precedent, sixty-three years elapsed before a second permanent establishment was made by the Carmelites in Port Tobacco, Maryland, in 1790. Between the years 1790 and 1830 other permanent foundations followed in relatively quick succession—the Visitandines in Georgetown, District of Columbia (1799), the Emmitsburg Sisters of Charity in Maryland (1809), the Sisters of Loretto in Bardstown, Kentucky (1812), the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore (1829), and the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy in Charlestown, South Carolina (1829). Another Order of this period, the Religious of the Sacred Heart, who first came to America from France in 1818 to open mission schools along the upper and lower Mississippi River, was unique in that it made a permanent foundation in America, but continued to be governed from its headquarters in Europe. With the exception of the Ursulines, whose foundresses were Americans who had entered an Ursuline convent in Belgium, and the Religious of the Sacred Heart, all of the above communities were founded by American women under the auspices of a priest or bishop.

This phenomenal rise of religious orders in America between the years 1790 and 1830 bore a striking resemblance to the unprecedented birth of women’s apostolic orders in Europe after the French Revolution. Women donning habits of seventeenth, eighteenth, or early nineteenth-century origin were, for the first time in European history, leaving the cloister behind to engage in apostolic works such as teaching or nursing. Some of these new congregations developed so extensively and quickly that within a few decades after the French Revolution they were already assuming a place of prominence alongside the old great orders.

The rapid development of these numerous congregations, so different from the older traditional orders, presented a variety of canonical problems for Rome. However, the Holy See, “long hesitant about women’s congregations with simple vows and whose members were not secluded, changed its attitude when it realized
that this new type of order was especially well suited to many of the new conditions." Given the new climate of European religious life during these decades, it is not surprising that venerable old convents which had survived the period of secularization, such as St. Walburg's in Eichstatt, were allowed to reopen only on condition that they take up some form of apostolic and charitable work. Generally, the reorganization of the old orders proceeded slowly during this period. But foundations were being laid from which renewal and new forms of life were to come during the next two generations.

The religious climate of this era was alien to the foundation of enclosed monastic and contemplative communities in America and Europe alike. The work of rebuilding a European Church that had been torn asunder by revolution required a work force, as did the American Church which was still in its infancy. The Carmelites who first came to America and settled near Port Tobacco in 1790, were from a strictly contemplative community in Belgium which had a tradition of unceasing prayer in reparation for sin. They began with that same purpose in America, in addition to raising sheep, spinning wool, growing their own food, and printing prayer books as a means of self-support. Before long, however, John Carroll wrote to Rome, noting that "their convent would be a far greater benefit in the future if a school for the training of girls in piety and learning were begun by them." Having withstood repeated pressures to open a school, the Carmelites managed to retain their contemplative character and were able to survive on income accrued from dowries and endowments.

Another contemplative community, the Poor Clares, was less fortunate during this period. Three women came to Baltimore in 1793 after having been driven out of their French convent in 1792. They modified their original rule in order to teach and take in boarders, while continuing many practices of the contemplative life. Their austere life, extreme poverty, and scant knowledge of English forced them to close their school in 1801, and the few remaining nuns returned to Europe in 1806.

Isaac Hecker (1819–1888), who founded the Paulist congregation, epitomized the active American temper of the nineteenth century when he proclaimed: "Our age is not an age of martyrdom, nor an age of hermits, nor a monastic age. . . . Our age lives in its busy marts, in counting-rooms, in workshops, in homes, and
in the varied relations that form human society, and it is into these that sanctity is to be introduced.” It is doubtful that Benedictine women would have survived in mid-nineteenth-century America, had they not already dedicated themselves to the work of teaching at the time of their restoration in 1835.

As noted above, from 1790 to 1830 communities of American origin took root and grew strong in a largely Anglo-American Church. But as that Church began to incorporate more and more European immigrants, both the old orders and the new apostolic congregations of Europe were tapped for missionary and educational help. During the period from 1830–1860 at least thirty-five additional foundations of religious women and men were made in the United States. And the trend continued. The seventy-year period from 1830–1900 “was an era of remarkable expansion of religious communities more or less following the streams of immigration and the elaboration of ecclesiastical structures in the nation. Approximately 220 religious communities made foundations.” Only a third of the women’s communities founded during this period continued to be governed by a European motherhouse. The others, independent of Europe, “had this status because of their original autonomous position as American foundations or because efforts to maintain a link with the founding European motherhouse either were not made or were unsuccessful.” The first Benedictine community of women founded in St. Marys, PA, in 1852, ended up in the latter category.

The experience of women religious in the United States during the nineteenth century cannot be generalized. However, certain universal experiences quickly emerge out of the diversity and complexity of a bewildering variety of developing orders and congregations—untimely deaths due to illness or natural disaster, physical hardships and spiritual deprivation, cultural disparities and language differences, frequent failures with only occasional success in their works, and canonical struggles for recognition and approval. The ultimate dedication of these women—identification with Jesus Christ through the service of God’s People—appears to be the universal and overriding factor accounting for their survival and growth. Astonishingly, their numbers grew from forty to forty thousand within the century of Catholicism’s greatest challenge, the challenge of “preserving and fostering its faith among millions of immigrant members, and of establishing her credibility in an alien and often hostile society.”
Anti-Catholic Nativism

A particularly hostile and violent wave of American nativism necessitates brief treatment here for two reasons: 1) The strong anti-convent sentiments of the 1830's and 1840's lingered during the decade that witnessed the founding of the first community of Benedictine women in America. In many instances the campaigns of the Know-Nothing Party made it virtually impossible for nuns to teach in the very schools they left Europe to staff. 2) The anti-foreigner and anti-Catholic crusades of this period were largely responsible for driving immigrant Catholicism into ethnic ghettos. The German Catholic Brotherhood of Pennsylvania and its colony at St. Marys, PA, is a poignant example of mid-nineteenth century ghetto Catholicism.

In general, nativism included every type and level of antipathy toward aliens, their institutions, and their ideas. Of interest here is that particular brand of American nativism that manifested itself in a specific chain of events in eastern American cities in the late 1830's and early 1840's. The anti-foreign parties which arose in New York and other cities after 1835, and gradually evolved into the powerful Know-Nothing agitation of the 1850's, stood for a certain kind of nationalism. The nativists believed that any influence originating abroad threatened the very life of the nation within. As the influx of European Catholic immigrants increased dramatically during the 1830's, the nativists took to the offensive.

The rapid growth of convents in American society alarmed the Protestant population. The increasing presence of convents seemed to them to be part of the alleged existence of Catholic plots to capture the American Republic for the Pope. In addition to being Catholic and often foreign-born, nuns were perceived as a threat to the “cult of true womanhood” and the ideal of “Republican motherhood.” “By renouncing marriage and motherhood for themselves, by allegedly proselytizing Protestant children and attempting to enlist Protestant daughters into their ranks, nuns appeared to endanger the essential links between family, church and state enunciated in the ideology of domesticity.”

The most notorious of violences done to convents in this era was the burning of the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts, by a Protestant mob in August of 1834. Vicious denunciations of nuns as social deviants followed in such publications
as the American edition of Scipio de Ricci’s *Female Convents: Secrets of Nunneries Disclosed* (1834), and Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal* (1836). Nationwide publicity was also the result of defamatory newspaper and magazine articles and harangues from Protestant pulpits. It was not uncommon for nuns to be harassed by stone-throwing, literal mud-slinging, and the singing of offensive songs in the streets outside their convents. They were jeered at in city streets, called “papists,” “cross-backs,” and “pope-lovers.”

Male writers, ministers, and editors constituted the chief leadership and membership of the convent reform movements of the early 1830’s. These “reformers” called for legislation supporting state inspection and regulation of convents, “but lacked the formal organization that characterized the antislavery and temperance crusades. It was not until the emergence of the anti-Catholic, anti-foreign American, or Know-Nothing Party in the 1850’s that convent reformers found the mechanism to put their demands into action. Anti-convent petition campaigns in Massachusetts and Maryland resulted in the legislatures of those states appointing ‘Nunnery Committees’ to examine the issue.”

The American or Know-Nothing Party was at the height of its meteoric career when the founding Benedictine women from Eichstatt arrived in Pennsylvania. Between 1850 and 1854 the forces which had been breeding antagonism toward foreigners and Catholics in the previous two decades, took political shape in the American Party. The Know-Nothings enjoyed a spectacular rise in popularity, but by 1856 their tenuous unity had been “sacrificed on the altar of sectionalism,” and their popular appeal had “dissipated in the clashing interests from which grew a civil war.” Their efforts at convent reform enjoyed only temporary success also, for the investigations of Nunnery Committees often failed to substantiate the reformers’ claims that women were being held in convents against their will. Billington reports the escapade of one particular committee which managed to “trample” through a school building, frightening children, “treating the nuns with little respect, and poking into closets and corners to find the dread evidences of Popery which propaganda writers had convinced them should be there.” The investigation turned out to be a complete farce when “after thoroughly disrupting the school, the whole party adjourned to an elaborate dinner where
champagne flowed freely, although sale of this beverage was forbidden in the state."^{102}

Anti-Catholic nativism was a formidable obstacle to the well-being of American Catholic sisters during the first half of the nineteenth century. In a wider context, it also had a profound influence on the shape of American Catholicism for decades to come. "Many of the Catholic immigrants retired into the world of the church as a substitute homeland, alienated from the American mainstream."^{103} Of particular interest here, is the influence of anti-Catholic nativism on German immigrant Catholicism. The religious nationalism of the German immigrants was solidly reinforced and became entrenched, as ethnic separateness became a viable shelter from nativist hostility and attack.

German Catholicism in Nineteenth-Century America

German emigration to America was precipitated by the Napoleonic Wars (1800–1815), and continued steadily until the 1920's. The causes for this massive emigration of people from a specific European country were varied and complex, but four main factors emerge as significant: 1) The political condition in Germany after the Wars of Napoleon was a powder keg. The movement to unify the German peoples resulted in bitter jealousy and antagonism between the powerful nations of Prussia and Austria. 2) Rising militarism resulted in increased taxes to support a military state, and led to nearly universal military conscription by 1870. 3) Crumbling economic conditions made it virtually impossible for countless numbers of people to find work to support their families. Eighty per cent of the population was composed of small landowners, farmhands, domestic handworkers and small shop-owners, people hardly equipped to find jobs in a rapidly changing military-industrial society. 4) Growing religious persecution initiated in the aftermath of the French Revolution reached its peak in Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* and the May Laws of 1873. German people emigrated for religious reasons as much as for material well-being.\textsuperscript{104}

Coincidentally, German immigration began to increase rapidly during the exact same decade that the Nativists began their organized attack on Catholicism. Before 1830, the number of
German Catholic immigrants in America was approximately 2,197, considerably smaller than the total Irish Catholic population of about 35,356. But by 1840, there were 38,876 German Catholics in America. By 1850, two years before the arrival of the Eichstätt Benedictine foundresses, the number had risen to approximately 110,830. German immigration experienced a new impetus after the Civil War, accounting for the arrival of more than 50,000 immigrants in New York harbor alone in a single year. The trend continued steadily until the 1920's when the total German Catholic immigrant population was approximately 1,333,300.  

The German Catholics who emigrated to the United States brought with them the concerns of the German church, then struggling to find its place in the new Germany undergoing "a political and religious metamorphosis." Political questions had necessarily occupied the forefront of concern in the German church, but the restoration of Catholicism in nineteenth-century Germany was undergirded by a renewal of piety. Catholic life "exhibited the signs of renewal as parish missions increased, religious confraternities multiplied, and Catholic culture developed. An important ingredient in this revival was the parish church. For centuries the parish had been the center of church life and the nineteenth-century renewal emphasized its significance."  

This heightened sense of parochial life accompanied German immigrants to America where they "sought to establish their own brand of religion. This link with the fatherland was especially strong, and from the very beginning it presented serious problems of adjustment for the church in the United States. The revival of church life in Germany and an increasing sense of nationalism reinforced the distinctiveness of German Catholicism, and later immigrants reflected this loyalty to a specific religious heritage."  

The issue of German religious nationalism in America emerged as early as 1808 when the German Catholic community in New York City, which had hitherto worshipped together with the Irish and the French, petitioned Archbishop John Carroll of Baltimore to send them a priest "who is capable of undertaking the spiritual care of our souls in the German language, which is our Mother Tongue."  

By the mid-1840's, the pattern of religious nationalism among German Catholic immigrants was clear. They settled together in colonies wherever possible and immediately began the construction of a church and a school. Of primary importance to them was
the freedom to carry out their traditional religious observances and customs. Their desire was to have a place where they could hear Sunday sermons and go to confession in their own language, and where they could take an active part in parish life through their beloved societies. They wanted the order and discipline of parish life as they had known it before coming to the United States. Since the Irish and English Catholics had no language problem of their own, "the German immigrants felt their new coreligionists could not properly understand the close bond which existed in the German soul between the practice of his faith and the traditional customs which were deeply rooted in the centuries-old Catholic culture of the German fatherland." 109

As history abundantly shows, Catholic Europe did not abandon her emigrant sons and daughters. An outpouring of the European Catholic missionary spirit 110 manifested itself in mission societies formed in France, Italy, and Germany to care for the spiritual needs of compatriots the world over, especially in the New World. Spiritual and material aid came to German American immigrants from the two well-known German mission societies founded specifically to further the missionary activities of the Church in North America—the Leopoldinen Stiftung established in Austria in 1829, and the Ludwig-Missionsverein founded in Bavaria in 1838. 111 The financial support of the latter was one of the most influential factors in the founding of Bavarian Benedictine life in North America.

The revived missionary spirit of Catholic Europe and the ancient model of Benedictine Anglo-Saxon and Celtic monk missionaries of the early Middle Ages found its embodiment in the 1840's in Boniface Wimmer, a monk from the restored monastery of Metten in Bavaria. 112 By 1846, a beleaguered pocket of German Catholic immigrants in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, found a champion in this monk who believed that the Benedictine Order was the "most adapted for the American missions, not to convert the native Indians, but to provide for the spiritual necessities of German immigrants." On November 8, 1845, he continued:

When we consider North America today, we can see at a glance that there is no other country in the world which offers greater opportunities for the establishment and spread of the Benedictine Order, no country that is so much like our old Europe was... The destitute and unfortunate [there] have no one who would offer them a hospitable roof, the orphan naturally becomes the victim of vice and religious neglect—in a word, the conditions in America are like those of
Europe 1000 years ago, when the Benedictine Order attained the fullest development and effectiveness by its wonderful adaptability and stability.\textsuperscript{113}

\section*{Marienstadt, Elk County, Pennsylvania}

The Benedictine Order was planted in North America when anti-Catholic hostility and ethnic prejudice were explosive throughout southwestern Pennsylvania. Political nativism gained ground in this state when in 1837 the citizens of Germantown formed a Native American Association with a constitution that denied suffrage and the right to hold office to immigrants and naturalized citizens. The Association’s crusade was somewhat subtle at first, but by 1843 the Party’s antagonism had gained such momentum that it culminated in the well-known Philadelphia riots of 1844, a "series of riots which turned the City of Brotherly Love into a chaos of hatred and persecution."\textsuperscript{114} As Nativists throughout the East organized their attack on immigrant Catholicism during the 1840’s, so too did Catholics organize their resistance. One such organization called the German-American Catholic Brotherhood of Philadelphia and Baltimore founded the colony of Marienstadt in 1842.\textsuperscript{115}

Founded early in 1842, the Baltimore branch of the Brotherhood held a series of meetings with the idea of founding a purely German Catholic haven from Nativist hostility. After extensive deliberation a plan was adopted. At that time there was still a considerable amount of land in Pennsylvania that could be bought at a nominal price from corporate land investors. Thus, commissioned by the Brotherhood, a committee established in January of 1842 set out to select a suitable place for a settlement dedicated to "the free, complete and undisturbed exercise of their religion; the bringing up of their children in the faith of their fathers; instruction in every required branch of knowledge; safety in their acquired property; a free, independent and quiet existence, with people of the same faith, the same language, the same manners and the same customs."\textsuperscript{116} Although the specific reasons for their choice are unknown, the committee chose an Elk County site (then still Shippen County), 35,000 acres of wilderness, which the Brotherhood purchased from the Fox Land Company of Boston for seventy-five cents an acre.\textsuperscript{117}
In October of 1842, twenty-five immigrant families from Philadelphia and Baltimore set out in two groups for Elk County.\textsuperscript{118} After nearly three weeks of difficult travel, they met at the farm of John Green in Kersey, PA. Green provided shelter for the women and children, while the pioneer men “went back and forth, weekly, to the colony site on the banks of the Elk Creek, cutting paths, putting up cabins and clearing enough land to let in a bit of sunshine.”\textsuperscript{119}

Although far from completion and comfort, the families moved into their new homes on December 8. Tradition reports that “for the reason of this arrival and also from the fact that the first woman to set foot on the new land was named Mary (Stockman) the settlement was named Marienstadt (Marystown) and was placed under the direct guidance of the Blessed Virgin.”\textsuperscript{120} In the spring of 1843 thirty-three more families arrived from Philadelphia and Baltimore. When the 1844 riots broke out in Philadelphia, still more German Philadelphians fled to St. Marys.

The new settlement was far from a religious utopia. Bare survival was a struggle, but the deepest blow was the colonists’ inability to secure a resident priest. Many succumbed to discouragement and despair, while some families actually left the colony. In the autumn of 1843 when Alexander Cvitkovitz, the Superior of the Redemptorist Order in Baltimore, visited the colony he found the project doomed to failure. He remained at St. Marys for six weeks to study the weaknesses of the undertaking.

I began to determine the boundaries of the land bought by them by means of compass and map. Yet how surprised was I, when I found out soon after that these poor people had been clearing, with great labor, land which was not their own but erroneously regarded by them as theirs. I examined the surface carefully and drew lines of demarcation. Then I divided the land into parcels of 25, 50, 75 and 100 acres and marked the respective boundaries upon trees. I set apart the site where the future town was to be built, and I also drew up a plan for it. I advised them to build the houses in groups, and not to follow the usual plan of scattering them two, three, four and even five miles apart. . . . Here I thought, will be the place we shall point out to German Catholic immigrants upon their landing in America, so that they shall no longer live in the cities until they have earned sufficient money for the purchase of a piece of land in this colony.\textsuperscript{121}

When Cvitkovitz returned to Baltimore, he contacted two prominent men of the city—Mathias Benzinger and John Eschbach—and encouraged them to visit St. Marys with the intent of
acquiring possession of the colony. This they did, and the purchase was made on April 18, 1844. Cvitkovitz, in lieu of the Redemptorist Order, invested $10,000 in the colony, and provided the colony with its first resident pastor, Louis Cartuyvels, in August of 1844.

Initially, the Benzinger-Eschbach Company donated 100 acres to the Redemptorists for a church and a school. In 1845, the Company deeded over another 800 acres to the Redemptorists on condition that they maintain the church and school at their own expense.

In 1846 more colonists came but they were destitute; and to relieve their poverty Father Alexander hired men to clear the Redemptorist property at 75 cents a day. But even this soon exhausted the resources and he had to borrow $20,000 to help the colonists and keep them from starving. The children went to Mass, spoon in hand, to receive their dole of food; every day soup was served to them at school to alleviate their hunger. A financial statement made out by Father Alexander covering the period from August 1845, to October, 1846, shows total receipts of $4,273 and expenses of $19,079.33.122

In 1845, a third party, Baron von Schroeter of Mecklenburg, joined the Benzinger-Eschbach Company and was influential in securing the interest of King Ludwig of Bavaria in the colony of St. Marys.123 Thus, in 1848 the Redemptorists obtained subsidies from the Ludwig-Missionsverein. Since the money had to be used for the support of the colonists rather than toward the liquidation of debts, it was clear by 1849 that St. Marys was a losing proposition for the Redemptorists. Unable to secure a new and more equitable contract with the Benzinger-Eschbach Company, Bernard Hafkenscheid, the American Vice-Provincial of the Redemptorist Order, removed his priests from St. Marys on November 20, 1849. Shortly thereafter, the School Sisters of Notre Dame who had come to St. Marys from Munich on August 15, 1847, to teach the girls of the colony, also left to resume their work in the more promising foundations of their Order in Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and Buffalo, New York.124

Historians of the Marienstadt colony infer that the failure of the Redemptorists was due to a plan far too grandiose for the physical and financial resources available in the region. The colony had been propagandized to appear much more inviting than the reality—a wilderness of dense forests, few tracts of cultivated land, and no efficient means of transportation for purposes of trade and communication with the outside world. Nonetheless,
the population of the colony was 964 in 1847, when unfavorable reports of difficulties in the settlement reached Boniface Wimmer at St. Vincent Monastery in Latrobe, PA, 116 miles from St. Marys.125

An opportunity presented itself for Boniface Wimmer to visit St. Marys, when in 1847 his year-old community accepted pastoral duties in Indiana, PA, a location halfway between Latrobe and the Marienstadt colony. He visited St. Marys in October, and wrote a lengthy account of his impressions to “Friends in Munich” on December 28, 1847.

St. Marys will never be as large a city as had been planned, because it is not situated on a river, nor near a navigable canal; if a railroad would eventually pass through the place it would not change conditions much. So far there is no factory here. . . . There are many other colonies more fertile than St. Marys with its Catholic school and Catholic surroundings . . . [yet] I am fully determined to found a Benedictine home at St. Marys, and, if I had a few more priests, I should begin next spring. I chose a place nine miles from the town which seems to be well situated for a monastery . . . . The company offered me the land gratis and promised necessary assistance.126

It was two years later that the Redemptorists left St. Marys, creating a circumstance that would allow Wimmer’s plan “to found a Benedictine home at St. Marys” to materialize. When Bishop O’Connor of Pittsburgh was unable to supply a German priest for the colony, he appealed to Boniface Wimmer to send one of his monks temporarily. In response, Wimmer sent Benedict Haindl and Andrew Zugriegel in December, 1849. Six months later the Bishop assigned one of his own priests to the parish at St. Marys, but his stay proved to be short-lived also.

As a result of this chain of events, Wimmer agreed to accept the mission of St. Marys permanently on condition that “the lands donated to the Redemptorists by the proprietors be deeded over to his Order and that sixty to seventy acres be added by the land company. Moreover, he insisted that the company give him, gratis, building lots in another part of the town which he might wish to exchange with the property owners who had settled near the monastery.”127 Having successfully negotiated this deal, Wimmer sent Benedict Haindl back to St. Marys as pastor of the parish in July of 1851. In November, he sent four lay brothers to staff the farm and household, and by February of 1852 he supplied a second priest. Because the church had been destroyed by fire on May 10, 1850, the school was being used for religious
services. The building which had formerly housed the School Sisters of Notre Dame became the second Benedictine monastery in North America.\textsuperscript{128}

The stage has now been set for the story which unfolds in the remaining chapters of this book. The long tradition of Benedictine women, particularly the history of Benedictine women in Eichstätt, Bavaria, became inextricably bound up with the history of St. Mary's and the developing American Church only five months after the Benedictine monks were permanently established at Marienstadt. The undying root of Benedictinism was about to sprout a new branch in a New World at a new moment in history.

Notes


4 Ibid., pp. 118–119.


The convent of Wimborne is of special significance in this historical survey. It was the house of Wimborne that trained Walburga (710–799), first Abbess of Heidenheim, who became the patronal foundress of St. Walburg Abbey in Eichstätt, Bavaria, in 1035.

Hilda of Whitby is one example of the prominence of Anglo-Saxon abbesses. In 664 an ecclesiastical Synod was held in her convent, at which she played an important role in the controversy over the question of union with Rome or the Celtic Church.


Hilpisch, p. 19.


For an extensive chapter on these two women, see Eckenstein, pp. 256–304.

The abbeys of women maintained autonomy during this period, whereas the Cluniac monks founded convents annexed to their monasteries which were ruled by the abbot. This arrangement lasted only until the end of the fourteenth century when most communities of Benedictine women regained their independence. For an illuminating and impressively documented study of French Benedictine women of this period, see Mary Skinner, “Benedictine Life for Women in Central France, 850–1100: A Feminist Revival,” in *Distant Echoes*, pp. 87–113.
For an account of the spread of Benedictinism among women during this period to Spain, Portugal, Bohemia, Poland, Dalmatia, Hungary, and the Scandinavian countries, see Hilpisch, pp. 21-22, and van Zeller, pp. 58-74.


See Eckenstein, pp. 328-353, for an engrossing account of the "convent of Helfta and its literary nuns."

van Zeller, p. 93.

Hilpisch, p. 46.

Ibid., pp. 46-48.

For a general description of nunneries during this period of decline, and an interesting theory about them as a "boon for women of the Middle Ages," see chapter 5, entitled "Nunneries," by Eileen Power, in Medieval Women, pp. 89-99.


Ibid., p. 178.


It must be noted that change was not easily made in all convents. The convent of Sonnenburg in the diocese of Brixen, and Urspring in Württemberg, are notorious examples of uprisings in opposition to imposed reforms. See Eckenstein, pp. 421-427; Hilpisch, pp. 51-53; van Zeller, pp. 123-125.

Fascinating stories of resistance are to be found in Eckenstein, pp. 458-476; Hilpisch, p. 59; van Zeller, pp. 137-139.

Hilpisch, p. 62.


Hilpisch, pp. 64-65.
About this new “Benedictine” orientation, Hilpisch writes: “The Rule of Benedict was for them scarcely more than a form, as the Rule of St. Augustine or of St. Francis was for other new foundations of this and later times, since the Roman curia required of all new congregations the acceptance of an older rule. The contemplative orders adapted the Rule of Benedict, but their religious life was formed by the particular devotions and piety which attracted them and inspired their foundation, and also by their constitutions, drawn up according to the spirit of the times.” (p. 66).


“These statutes required no particular austerities nor did they mean a new formulation of the Benedictine ideal as was tried in the French convents. They attempted only to remove certain improprieties and to secure a good regular life. In keeping with the old Benedictine tradition they ordinarily started with the concern for the Office” (Hilpisch, p. 70). For a fuller treatment of the Kühbach statutes, see pp. 70–75.

Hilpisch sketches a picture of the life in German convents of this period, based on the statutes Prince-Abbot Adalbert von Schleifras enacted for the convent at Fulda in 1702 (pp. 78–82).

van Zeller, p. 173.

Ibid., p. 174.

Knowles, pp. 170–176.

Hilpisch, pp. 84–85.

Ibid., pp. 86–87.

From its foundation until the secularization of 1806, St. Walburg’s enjoyed “abbey” status. From the time of its restoration in 1835, until it was again raised to the status of abbey under the leadership of Abbess Karolina Kroiss in 1914, it was designated a “priory” or “convent” interchangeably. Usage in this study will reflect the appropriate time periods.

in Eichstätt,” *Studien und Mitteilungen* 15 (1894): 45–51; Michaela Mayer, O.S.B., “Zur neuesten Chronik des Ordens,” *Studien und Mitteilungen* 35 (1914): 530–533; Birgitta zu Münster, cited in n. 10. The author of *Die Abtei St. Walburg* cites a two volume history of St. Walburg Abbey written by a Jesuit in the eighteenth century “as the most valuable work on the history of our convent”: Anton Luidl, S.J., *Eichstättisches Heiligtum*, Munich und Stadtamhof, 1750 (p. 113, n. 10). About this work the author later comments: “Abbess Adelgundis Pettenkofer asked Father Luidl to write an extensive work on St. Walburg’s and its sacred shrine and had it dedicated to Empress Amalie, consort of Charles VII. In his two-volume work Father Luidl drew freely upon the archives of the house as well as upon other documents and left a work of cultural and historical value” (pp. 44–45). The author of this study has been unable to locate a copy of this two volume history in the United States.


43 *St. Walburga: Her Life and Heritage*, p. 38.

44 It is important for the subsequent history of St. Walburg Abbey to note that the convent was founded under episcopal jurisdiction and has remained under episcopal authority for 950 years.

45 *Spring and Harvest*, p. 27.

46 Ibid.

47 Hilpisch, p. 53.


49 Eckenstein, p. 421.

50 *Spring and Harvest*, pp. 27–28. The influence of Johann von Eych in the history of St. Walburg’s cannot be underestimated. Five centuries later, in 1937, the Abbey’s revised *Regel und Konstitutionen* was in part inspired by a newly discovered (1934) copy of Bishop von Eych’s statutes, dated 1456 (SBCA 3: 1-2-1, f.5). As recently as 1985, the newly elected Abbess Maria Franziska Kloos chose as her abbatial crozier a replica of the staff of Johann von Eych (St. Walburga: Her Life and Heritage, p. 71).

51 *Spring and Harvest*, p. 28.

52 van Zeller, p. 140.

53 At the turn of the century the community was composed of twenty-four choir sisters and fourteen lay sisters. Buchner, p. 37.


55 Ibid., p. 31.
Another extended excerpt from Chronik-Eichstätt is cited in *Die Abtei St. Walburg*, pp. 41-43; Eng. trans., *Spring and Harvest*, pp. 31-32.

57 Ibid., p. 33.

58 Jud, p. 49-50; Mayer, p. 632.

59 *St. Walburga: Her Life and Heritage*, pp. 40-44.

60 For an extended treatment of this outstanding Abbess, see F. Mader, "Adelgundis I. Pettenkofer, Äbtissin zu St. Walburg," in Zum 900 Jährigen Jubiläum, pp. 61-74.

61 Cited in Hilpisch, p. 70.

62 Ibid., p. 71. Hilpisch goes on to state that the Eichstätt nuns were also required to make a general confession twice a year to a Jesuit priest.

63 Ibid., p. 74.

64 *Spring and Harvest*, pp. 33-34.


67 Ibid., pp. 81-87.

68 *Spring and Harvest*, p. 34. Here she is referred to as "the superior of the dissolved convent." It is striking that the cenobitic tradition of handing on leadership continued "undercover" during the period of secularization.


71 Stiftsbibliothek in Metten, original; cited in *Die Abtei St. Walburg*, p. 48.

72 Letter to a government official, December 10, 1830. SWAA, original; cited in *Die Abtei St. Walburg*, pp. 46-47; Eng. trans., *Spring and Harvest*, p. 35.
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73 Ibid., from another letter dated April 26, 1831.

74 Karl Ried, Zum 900 Jährigen Jubiläum, p. 87. The petition was signed by nine choir nuns and four lay sisters.

75 Cited in Die Abtei St. Walburg, p. 49; Eng. trans., Spring and Harvest, p. 36.


79 Some generally accepted statistics indicate that approximately 250,000 European Catholics came to the United States in the 1830's, 700,000 in the 1840's, and 1,000,000 or more in the 1860's.

80 Ellis, pp. 82–83.

81 Ibid., p. 83.

82 Several instances of nuns who arrived in the New World prior to this are worth noting. Ursuline nuns from France had first arrived in Canada in 1639 to teach Indian girls and daughters of French settlers. So-called “Gray Nuns” had accompanied young women from Paris to Mobile in 1704. After the women married settlers there and were well provided for, the nuns returned to France. Another group from France, probably Daughters of Charity, accompanied young women to Biloxi in 1721, but returned to Europe after having witnessed the marriages of all of them. Mary Ewens, O.P., The Role of the Nun in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Arno Press, 1978), pp. 21–22.

83 Ibid., pp. 22–24.

84 Well researched historical sketches of these communities appear in Ewens, pp. 35–64, and Barbara Misner, S.C.S.C., “A Comparative Social Study of the Members and Apostolates of the First Eight Permanent Communities of Women Religious Within the Original Boundaries of the U.S., 1790–1850” (Ph.D. dissertation, Catholic University of America,
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85 Some of the more prominent new congregations founded during this period were the Sisters of the Christian Schools of Mercy in France (1807), the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur (1808), Daughters of Charity in Italy (1816) and the Sisters of the Holy Family in southern France (1817). Aubert, p. 215. See also John W. Padberg, S. J., “Memory, Vision and Structure: Historical Perspectives on the Experience of Religious Life in the Church,” in *Religious Life in the U.S. Church: The New Dialogue*, pp. 74–77.

86 Ibid., p. 216.

87 Carroll to Antonelli, September 19, 1792, cited by Ewens, p. 37, n. 13.

ies*, vol. 31, ed. Thomas F. Meehan (New York: The United States Catho­
lic Historical Society, 1940), pp. 7–118.


90 Kennelly, p. 84.

91 Ibid.

bum America,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 5 (Summer/Fall 1986): 305–324;

93 See last section of this chapter.


95 Although dated, Ray A. Billington’s, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800–1860: A Study in the Origins of American Nativism* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938), remains the most comprehensive survey of anti-Catholic nativism before the Civil War. He cites five main causes for the wave of hostility towards the Catholic Church during this period: 1) the emancipation of Catholics in England in 1820 and 1832, 2) the trusteeism controversy among American Catholics in the 1820’s, 3) the First Plenary Council of Bishops in Baltimore in 1829, 4) the influx of immigrants from Ireland and Germany, and 5) the reform spirit of Protestant revivalism.


97 Billington, pp. 53–58.

98 For an enlightening summary of the insult and injury suffered by nuns in America between the years 1830–1859, see Ewens, *The Role of the Nun in Nineteenth Century America*, pp. 145–161. In pages 161–200, the author offers a penetrating analysis of nuns’ roles as they were depicted in the popular anti-Catholic literature of the period.

99 Mannard, p. 308.

100 Benedicta Riepp, foundress of Benedictine women in America, tells of her confrontation with a member of one of the Know-Nothing Nunnery Committees in a letter to Archbishop von Reisach dated May 20, 1855. Eng. trans. in Girgen, p. 45.

101 Billington, p. 380. For an extended treatment of the rise and fall of "Know-Nothingsm" between 1850 and 1860, see pp. 380–436.

102 Ibid., p. 414.


105 Ibid., p. 6.

106 Dolan, The Immigrant Church, p. 69. In 1848 the German bishops met at Wurtzburg to take up the concerns of Catholicism in Germany. "They recognized the importance of the parish in the lives of the people, and to renew their fervor they urged the revival of parochial life."

107 Ibid.


109 Barry, pp. 9–10.

110 For an overview of the "resumption of missionary work" in Catholic Europe after the French Revolution, see Johannes Beckman, in The Church Between Revolution and Restoration, pp. 189–205.


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114 Billington, p. 220ff.

115 This German Catholic settlement is variously referred to as St. Maria Stadt, Marystown, St. Mary, St. Mary’s and St. Marys. “St. Marys” appears to be the more common English rendering of Marienstadt, and remains the spelling of the city’s name up to the present day.

116 This excerpt from the articles of the German Catholic Brotherhood was quoted in a propaganda document drawn up by Mathias Benzinger, Baron von Schröter, and John Eschbach of the Benzinger-Eschbach Company. The document gives a glowing account of the acreage in Elk County, providing generous detail about the location of St. Marys, the terrain, the climate, and the religious goals of the settlement. In addition, the authors specify the “conditions for admission” into the settlement, and offer information about travel expenses and accommodations. Undoubtedly, the document was meant to circulate in Germany since it details the traveling expenses from Munich to Bremen, and then from Bremen to New York or Baltimore, and on to St. Marys, PA. This document, dated 1846, is entitled, “The Colony of Saint Mary, in Pennsylvania, North America.” It has been translated by Joseph Schneider from the German copy in the Library of Congress, and published by the Historical Society of St. Marys and Benzinger Township, St. Marys, PA. An editorial note explains that this document was “one of the many statements and foreign magazine articles written about the colony of St. Marys in the early days, when communication was remote and the stories were mostly of hearsay or built up for other reasons” (p. 13). SBCA 4:1-2-2, f.2.


118 The names of some of these families and other fascinating details about their early days and months at St. Marys are supplied in a “History of St. Mary’s Parish Church,” written by an anonymous Benedictine sister, and published in American Catholic Historical Researches 22 (1905), pp. 110–115; see also Albert Brehm, History of St. Marys Church (St.
Marys, PA: Lenze Associated Enterprises, Inc., 1960); Remigius Burge-
meister, O.S.B., History of the Development of Catholicity in St. Marys (St.
Marys, PA, 1919); J. M. Lenhart, O.M.Cap., “Beginnings of the German
Colony of St. Mary’s, Elk Co., Pa. (1842–1843),” Central-Blatt and Social
Justice 25:10 (January 1933): 313–315; Charles Schaut, St. Marys, PA,

119 Schaut, p. 1.
120 Brehm, p. 13.
121 Alexander Cvitkovitz, C.SS.R., to Count Chaplain Mueller, Direc-
tor of the Ludwig-Missionsverein in Munich, October 12, 1843. Eng.
trans. by J. M. Lenhart, O.M.Cap., printed in full in Brehm, pp. 18–20,
and in Ellis, Documents of American Catholic History, pp. 271–275.

122 Rudolph N. Reiss, C.SS.R., Provincial Archivist of the Redemp-
torist Order, to Albert Brehm, February 12, 1952, cited in History of St.
Marys Church, p. 22.
123 There are differing opinions about the role of the Baron in the
early history of the colony. Some sources credit him with the founding
of the colony, while other accounts suggest that he appeared on the
scene three years after the settlement was established. He is commonly
depicted as a hopeless enthusiast who eventually lost everything in his
dealings with Benzinger and Eschbach. It seems that Boniface Wimmer
eventually befriended him and the two remained friends for many
years. For a discussion of the controversy surrounding von Schröter, see
Brehm, pp. 11–12 and 14–16.

124 Ibid., p. 23; Baska, pp. 21–22.
125 Schaut, p. 2.
126 Original in Annalen der Verbreitung des Glaubens 18 (Munich): 229–
236. This excerpt is from a nearly complete translation of the letter in
Morkin and Seigel, pp. 43–48. Shorter excerpts from the letter also ap-

127 Burgemeister, p. 16.
128 Brehm, p. 32. Benedicta Riepp recaps this history of St. Marys in
her letter to the Ludwig-Missionsverein, December 15, 1853. Eng. trans.,
Girgen, pp. 33–35.
Chapter II

The Women Who Planted the Tradition in North America: 1852–1855

The story of the arrival of the first Benedictine women in North America in 1852, from St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt, Bavaria, and their early struggle for survival, identity and autonomy has been told from a variety of perspectives and with varying degrees of accuracy and insight. While these studies have succeeded somewhat in retrieving and piecing together the often disparate elements of a very complex story, a deeper exploration into the individual and communal lives of the women who constituted the earliest communities of Benedictine women in North America has yet to be made. What is true of the more traditional, institutional and hierarchical histories of Catholicism in America is also true of American Benedictine history. There has been a tendency to focus too exclusively on the plans and policies, the successes and failures of those who ruled, often to the neglect of the people who were the community, who lived out their lives on the less visible level of daily fidelity and perseverance.
Those who ruled in the planting phase of American Benedictine history were Boniface (Sebastian) Wimmer, O.S.B. (1809–1887), and Benedicta (Sybilla) Riepp, O.S.B. (1825–1862). Each had received authority from their respective European superiors to govern the first two communities of Benedictine men and women in North America—St. Vincent Monastery in Latrobe, Pennsylvania (1846), and St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, Pennsylvania (1852). But by the time Benedicta Riepp and her two companions actually set foot in the wilderness clearing of St. Marys, Boniface Wimmer was well on his way toward claiming the role of both founder and superior of the Benedictine women in North America. Almost immediately, clashing loyalties and ideologies contributed to the mounting tension and conflict which so characterized the period prior to the Roman Decree of 1859.  

The studies referred to above place Boniface and Benedicta on center stage. Standing in the wings, yet directly affected by the drama being played out between these two strong characters, were the women who had come to St. Marys imbued with the desire to serve the German immigrants there, and to embrace the way of life transplanted from an Old World Benedictine convent with its fourteen centuries of tradition. Forty women were drawn to the remote region of St. Marys, Elk County, PA, between July 22, 1852, and December 16, 1855. Until their dispersal into branch houses began in June of 1856, these women constituted the first and only community of Benedictine women in North America. These “invisible” women are the focus of this chapter.

The major goal of this study is to determine the shape of Benedictine life among women after the first thirty years of their history in America. In the final analysis, external circumstances, structures and identifiable forms are the clearest indicators of the shape of a historical tradition at a particular time in its history. However, it must be recognized from the outset that human beings—particular people with personal stories—are the bearers of a tradition and mediate the values of a given tradition, at a particular time, under certain circumstances. Appropriately then, the purpose of this chapter is to introduce the pioneer women who were the bearers of the Bavarian Benedictine tradition in mid-nineteenth-century America.

Little is known about the lives of the earliest Benedictine women in North America. A community coming to birth and preoccupied with the task of survival had not the time or the
inclination to reflect upon and document its own story. Some of what did exist by way of records, documents, and letters was destroyed by natural disaster, or burned along with the belongings of anyone who died of a contagious disease. Moreover, much valuable material was destroyed to avoid the embarrassment caused by publication of controversial material. Nonetheless, it is of paramount importance to retrieve and communicate what can be known. A studied look at pioneer Benedictine women—just who they were, from where they came, what roles they assumed—is an essential first step in gaining deeper insight into a way of life which, though significantly reshaped by the forces of nineteenth-century American culture, took firm root in a society largely alien to Old World monasticism.3

The First Group from Eichstätt (1852)

Oral tradition has kept alive the story of a “beautiful and consoling dream” had by Benedicta Riepp in her time of deepest confusion and darkness. “She saw a large tree growing up, covered all over with beautiful white blossoms. She took the tree as a symbol of her future community.”

Given the eventual flowering of the female branch of Benedictinism in North America, it is not surprising that Benedicta’s dream is often recalled and that the recurring images in the women’s story are organic, expressed in language of planting, growing, branching, blossoming, and bearing fruit.5 The planting began on North American soil with Benedicta Riepp, Walburga Dietrich, and Maura Flieger.

Much about Benedicta (Sybilla)6 Riepp is shrouded in mystery.7 She was born in Waal, in the old Swabian province of the Kingdom of Bavaria, on June 28, 1825. Born to Johann Riepp, a glassblower, and Katharina Mayr, she was baptized Maria Sybilla on the forenoon of July 30 in St. Anna Church. Her godparents were Casimir Halzschaf and Sybilla Kendler.8 Little else is known about her family and childhood, except that she had three sisters—Johanna, Sophia, and Juliana.9

When and how the Riepp family, and in particular Sybilla, became acquainted with the Benedictines at St. Walburg Convent
in Eichstätt is not clear. It is almost certain that Sybilla went to school in Waal.\textsuperscript{10} Waal was an old Catholic Swabian town located directly south of Augsburg and west of Munich, approximately 80 miles from Eichstätt. It is conceivable, therefore, that a convent with as ancient a tradition as that of St. Walburg would have been well known in the surrounding area. Furthermore, the restoration of St. Walburg Convent by the royal decree of Ludwig I in 1835 would have been a noteworthy event in the Bavarian Catholic world.

Sybilla entered St. Walburg Convent on January 7, 1844, only eight years and five months after King Ludwig’s decree (June 7, 1835) to safeguard the continuation of the convent “on the condition that the nuns remaining there, with the help of new candidates, should take over the girls’ school for the city of Eichstätt.”\textsuperscript{11} It is logical to conclude that Sybilla was among the “new wave” of candidates seeking entrance into the convent in Eichstätt, the “younger, energetic and progressive sisters whose particular duty was the building up of the school.”\textsuperscript{12}

The first step in the new work of education had been taken on October 24, 1836, when the girls’ school of Eichstätt opened with religious services in St. Walburg’s Church. Eight days before this the first three novices who were destined to teach—Ludovica Bauer, Theresa Burkhard, Edwarda Schnitzer—professed their vows. When the convent of St. Walburg was secularized in 1806, the government had allowed the older nuns to remain there, supported by a meagre pension until their death. When the convent reopened in 1835, only thirteen aged nuns remained. The profession ceremony of October 16, 1836, inaugurated not only another generation of membership but a new era of an old and venerable religious house with a contemporary and unprecedented external mission.

By the time Sybilla Riepp entered the community in 1844, there was increasing tension between the older members “who had borne every disappointment and want” and the newer members caught up in the “energetic adoption and shaping of the ever-changing modern life.”\textsuperscript{13} The reopening of St. Walburg and its concomitant new work of education coincided in time with the appointment of Karl August von Reisach as Bishop of Eichstätt (1836–1846). He was a reformer and under him a new spirit and regime at the convent was to be inaugurated.\textsuperscript{14} It can be assumed
that Sybilla’s entrance and initiation into the community proceeded according to the then-evolving statutes.\textsuperscript{15}

On January 7, 1844, Sybilla Riepp was taken into the charge of the novice mistress for the stage of postulancy. As a postulant (Postulantin) she followed the schedule of the novices and gradually learned the rule of life under which she had entered. Seven months later she was invested as a choir sister\textsuperscript{16} and given the name Benedicta. Years later she recalled her contacts with Bishop von Reisach who had given his final approval for her investiture.

As a novice I had the great pleasure of personally experiencing your fatherly kindness. Often I had the honor of conversing with Your Excellency: you usually greeted me with the words ‘Here comes the Swabian’ and then you added ‘they are honest people.’ I hope that was also true of me and that it still is—in a childlike way. For me the many salutary admonitions and instructions which your Excellency gave us all are unforgettable. Daily I call them to mind. . . . \textsuperscript{17}

Benedicta’s novice mistress was Deocara Hinterreiter, the first to be appointed to this position after the restoration in 1835. Both she and Prioress Emmerama Streitel were among the thirteen women who had survived the period of secularization, and were dedicated to handing down to the younger generation the traditions and customs of the old monastery.\textsuperscript{18}

Benedicta’s novitiate lasted nearly two years, rather than the one-year canonical requirement. A possible explanation hinges on the fact that those novices who had been selected to be teachers were sometimes assigned to the school for practice teaching in all the grades after at least three months of the novitiate had elapsed.\textsuperscript{19} In addition, they were required to take the teacher-certification exam before the end of the novitiate, unless they had taken it before their investiture, which was the more desirable case.\textsuperscript{20}

On July 9, 1846, at the age of twenty-one, Benedicta Riepp professed her first vows in Latin, according to the ancient monastic formula:

\begin{quote}I, Sister Maria Anna Benedicta, promise before God and his saints stability and conversion of my morals, obedience, poverty and chastity, for three years according to the Rule of St. Benedict and the statutes of this monastery, which is constructed in honor of St. Walburga, Virgin, in the presence of the Most Reverend and Illustrious Lord Karl August von Reisach, Bishop of Eichstätt.\end{quote}\textsuperscript{21}
Benedicta’s years of triennial vows must have been unsettling for both herself and the entire community. Prioress Emmerama Streitel died in 1846, and was succeeded by Ludovica Bauer, one of the first three women to profess vows after the restoration of 1835. Deocara Hinterreiter, Benedicta’s novice mistress, also died in 1848. With the death of the latter, the new community witnessed the passing of an historical era. She was the last to die of those who had survived the period of secularization. The community had lost thirteen members to death (nine choir sisters and four lay sisters) in thirteen years (1835–1848). Among the twenty-five remaining members no one was experienced beyond twelve years of profession. The new superior, Ludovica Bauer, frail and sickly, was also to die before the end of 1849.22

According to the statutes, the young and now depleted community was required to gather approximately one month before the expiration of Benedicta’s vows to determine her suitability and readiness for solemn profession.23 On July 9, 1849, Benedicta pronounced her solemn vows in these words:

I, Sister Maria Anna Benedicta, promise before God and his saints stability, and conversion of my morals, obedience, poverty and chastity according to the Rule of St. Benedict and the statutes of this monastery, which is constructed in honor of St. Walburga, Virgin, in the presence of Reverend Mother Ludovica Bauer, Subprioress.24

Benedicta matured quickly in the community. From the time of her entrance into the convent she was being prepared to teach in the girls’ school of Eichstatt. In addition to this work she was appointed novice mistress shortly after her solemn profession, at the age of twenty-four.25 It is not known exactly from whom she received this appointment—from the ailing superior, Ludovica Bauer, who died shortly after Benedicta’s solemn profession, or from the new prioress, Edwarda Schnitzer who succeeded her. In either case, it was an unusual appointment. The role of novice mistress had ordinarily been reserved for a mature and experienced community member.

Benedicta had been a teacher and novice mistress only three years when Prioress Edwarda Schnitzer26 appointed her superior of the first group bound for the new mission in North America. When and how Benedicta first became interested in the plight of the German immigrants in America is not known, but she was among those who volunteered that day in March or April of 1852. Prioress Edwarda had received a letter from Boniface Wimmer,
who twelve months earlier, in April of 1851, had visited St. Walburg’s with the specific intent of interesting the community in the American mission in Pennsylvania. Now he had written, begging the Prioress to send nuns at once. Prioress Edwarda read the letter to the community in the refectory, asked for volunteers, and chose from among them the three women who began the planting in North America.

Benedicta’s companions to America were Walburga (Wilhelmina) Dietrich, and Maura (Maria) Flieger. Professed at St. Walburg’s in 1841, Walburga was the senior member of the group and had served the community as portress and as an instructor of needlework. Maura, also skilled in needlework, had professed her vows as a lay sister only four years before she volunteered for service in America.

The steps leading up to the immediate departure of Benedicta, Walburga, and Maura reach back as far as the mid-1840’s, if not earlier, and involve the statutes of 1846, the Ludwig-Missionsverein, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Boniface Wimmer and Bishop Georg von Oettl. It is commonly held that the interest shown in the American mission by the community of St. Walburg in Eichstätt was sparked by Boniface Wimmer when he visited there in April, 1851. The Konstitutionen of 1846, however, not only reveals an interest in serving the German immigrants in America but also prescribes some measures to be taken in the screening of candidates to that purpose. In the section dealing with the acceptance of candidates and their necessary qualities, the Konstitutionen advises:

Since the girls’ schools in America will also be conducted by sisters, the Superior should direct her special attention to those candidates who are able to teach or who can be prepared for teaching. It is important to have enough individuals who teach, and who in the performance of this work, may be strengthened in sisterly love and faithful observance of the vows.

Further, in the section following this on the reception and investiture of novices, the issue becomes even more pointed.

Returning to the fact that we are called to staff the girls’ schools in America, it is important to accept those [candidates] who can become future teachers (although others should not be refused), because there should always be quite a number available. Because of this new endeavor which furthers the good of the community and influences its direction and spirit, I [Bishop Karl August von
Reisach] feel bound to decree that the Superior and the community
give preference to those candidates who are already capable of
teaching or those who have the qualities of mind and body to be
trained. Working together in the same field can only promote and
enliven the practice of sisterly love and all religious virtues.\textsuperscript{30}

The explicit mention of "America" in these statutes of 1846 is
surprising and leads to speculation about the source of this early
combine for staffing not only the girls' schools in Eichstätt, but
also the girls' schools in America. Two possibilities suggest them­selves here. The Ludwig-Missionsverein was founded in Munich,
Bavaria, on December 12, 1838 (just three years after the restora­
tion of St. Walburg Convent) for the specific purpose of giving
financial assistance to the Catholic cause in Asia and North
America. Although the care of German Catholic immigrants
rested with the bishops and priests, little beyond spiritual care
could be provided by them. So they turned to religious communi­
ties of women ready to serve in schools, hospitals, and charitable
institutions.

One of the first communities to receive the active cooperation
of the Ludwig-Missionsverein was the Congregation of the School
Sisters of Notre Dame, founded in Bavaria in 1833. In 1842 they
were given the Angerkloster in Munich for a motherhouse by
King Ludwig, and soon thereafter were prevailed upon to begin a
foundation in the United States.\textsuperscript{31} Enroute to America, a group of
Notre Dame sisters stopped at St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt
and "perhaps implanted in some members of the community the
germ of a missionary vocation."\textsuperscript{32} Thus it is possible that even be­
fore Boniface Wimmer requested the Eichstätt Benedictines in
1851, they had already become aware of the work of the Ludwig­
Missionsverein through their own Bishop, and had also been ex­
posed to the missionary enthusiasm of the School Sisters of Notre
Dame when they had passed through Eichstätt several years ear­
er.

In spite of these early connections with the American cause,
Wimmer's first request to Prioress Edwareda Schnitzer in 1851
seemed premature, not only to the community but to Bishop
Georg von Oettl as well. Two key factors contributed to the early
resistance of the community. First of all, the prospect of a mission
in America seemed foreign to their life and tradition of strict
enclosure. Secondly, St. Walburg's was still burdened with the
initial difficulties of taking over the local school. It seemed impos­
sible not only to free teachers for the new mission but also to find
replacements for them in Eichstätt. The Bishop of Eichstätt also held out against Wimmer’s first request, but not for long.

... the Rt. Rev. Bishop did not want to hear about it at that time because he wanted to start a daughter house in Monheim. I tried my good fortune, however, from here once more. I directed at the Rt. Rev. Bishop all the ‘shots’ that were at my disposal so cleverly that he capitulated and graciously permitted the departure of a few choir and lay sisters.

So, too, did Prioress Edwarda capitulate after Wimmer’s second request. On May 29, 1852, Edwarda wrote to the Supreme Council of the Ludwig-Missionsverein, requesting funds to cover the traveling expenses of the three women she had chosen to go to America. She explained her final consent in these words:

Even though I could do this only at a sacrifice for my convent which is now beginning to flourish, I gave my consent the more gladly, convinced by the permission and the approval of our Right Reverend Lord Bishop. I saw in it the working of Divine Providence, and I hope, not without reason, that with such a sacrifice on our part, the good Lord will reward our convent and all its members and will fill them with enthusiasm for their own vocation.

The Ludwig-Missionsverein contributed 900 florin toward the traveling expenses of Benedicta, Walburga and Maura. Less than a month after Prioress Edwarda’s appeal for funds, on June 12, 1852, the three women bound for America boarded a train for Pleinfeld. They were accompanied on this first leg of their journey by Prioress Edwarda, four other community members, and the chaplain of St. Walburg Convent, Anton Schmidt, S.J.. At Pleinfeld they bade farewell to their Prioress and traveling companions, then boarded another train bound for Bremen. On June 18 they set sail from Bremen, via Southhampton, on the streamer Washington.

Oral tradition has circulated a story with legendary overtones about the historic first journey of the three Bavarian Benedictine women to America. It was told that a violent storm threatened the lives of the people aboard the steamer Washington about mid-way through their journey. The captain gave orders to throw all personal belongings overboard in order to lighten the load of the ship. The nuns complied but pleaded to save just one thing, an 800-year-old wooden statue of Mary and the child Jesus which they had brought from Eichstätt. One of the sailors sympathetic to their pleading lowered the statue with ropes to the turbulent waters, planning to retrieve it later when the waters calmed. Legend
has it that the storm subsided when the statue reached the angry sea. It was then retrieved and now stands in a place of honor in the convent at St. Marys, PA.\textsuperscript{39}

The steamer \textit{Washington} docked in New York harbor on July 3, and Benedicta, Walburga and Maura disembarked on July 4, amidst the lively and noisy New York celebration of Independence Day. They found neither Boniface Wimmer nor a representative there to meet them as had been promised. After remaining in New York approximately four days, the women had no alternative but to set out on their own by train for St. Vincent’s Monastery in Westmoreland County, PA. Their means of transportation from the train station to the monastery, through forest and swamp, was a crude farmwagon which announced their “unexpected” arrival four days later on July 8.\textsuperscript{40} Having neglected to inform Bishop Michael O’Connor of the expected arrival of the nuns from Eichstätt, Wimmer detained them at St. Vincent’s while he requested the necessary documentation from the Bishop of Pittsburgh. The date affixed to the document certifying Bishop O’Connor’s permission for the Bavarian Benedictine women to establish a community in St. Marys, Elk County, is the same date on which Wimmer and the nuns left St. Vincent’s for St. Marys—July 15, 1852. Bishop O’Connor noted Wimmer’s neglect:

\begin{quote}
I expected, though, to have the matter prepared more formally and documents accordingly issued containing everything necessary for such a purpose.\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}

As a precaution against further neglect the Bishop went on to suggest that a “proper document” be drawn up “at the earliest opportunity,” and that until the community could be incorporated, it would be under his own jurisdiction in order “that what is commenced shall not be easily abandoned nor without proper cause.”

Wimmer’s version of the nuns’ arrival delivered to the \textit{Annalen}\textsuperscript{42} several weeks later implied that the whole process had moved along smoothly and according to his well-laid plan.

My express request to the work of the missions was, therefore, cheerfully accepted [by the community in Eichstätt] and it required only the consent of the Right Reverend Bishop to proceed immediately to bring it about. I am very grateful to the Bishop [Georg von Oettl] that without hesitation he allowed two capable choir sisters and one lay sister to come as a small beginning. They arrived here on July 15 and we accommodated them in a good private home— with the music teacher, Schwab—so they could recover from the hardships of the journey. Then I took them to St. Marys; but first I
showed them our Priory in Carrolltown which lies in just as rugged a region as does St. Marys, in order to prepare them for St. Marys. We arrived happily in the colony on the feast of St. James. . . .

Wimmer’s recollection of their arrival in this letter written twenty days later seems a bit grandiose. To Benedicta Riepp, Walburga Dietrich, and Maura Flieger the reality they encountered could not have squared with the enthusiastic accounts of St. Marys which had reached them in Bavaria. In the forest clearing there were “a few scattered farm houses, or rather log huts—completely surrounded by primeval forest land. Giant trees . . . looked down forbiddingly on all sides.” Their hopes and dreams for the future of Benedictine women in America and the advancement of the cause of German Catholic immigrants lay before them in “a wretched frame building, with only $100 in money which they brought with them.” Benedicta described the scene to King Ludwig six months later.

... years will pass before our gloomy, terrible region will be made somewhat brighter, and it will cost much perspiration, since at present, as far as the eye can see, there is only terrible woodland; between the trees here and there a small piece of land is cleared. Little has been done for our present location. . . .

Within their first six months at St. Marys, Benedicta, Walburga and Maura “accepted with amazing resolution the hardship, the poverty, and the inconvenience” which faced them on all sides. They arranged their new home—“a small house, hastily thrown together with boards, the ground floor of which contains an anteroom, and two small cells,” plus two other cells in the attic—according to a plan that allowed them to begin their convent life as they had grown accustomed to living it in Eichstätt. Early in the fall of 1852 they opened a free school for girls, receiving for their work a combined salary of twenty-five dollars per month, paid from the public tax. Benedicta taught the elementary subjects in German, Walburga taught the fine art of needlework, and since neither of them knew English, a lay woman was employed to teach the English classes. Although Maura had taught needlework at St. Walburg in Eichstätt, at St. Marys her domain was the kitchen. She was “an excellent cook who could produce the most savory dishes from poor, unlikely and unpromising materials.”

In her first extant letter to King Ludwig, Benedicta reported that sixty to eighty girls were attending their school in those early days, although irregularly due to “the long way to school, mostly
through the woods, and the great poverty." Given their severely cramped quarters and lack of resources, it is difficult to imagine how the three women managed to care for not only the students who attended their school, but also the twelve convent candidates who came to live with them within the first fifteen months of their establishment at St. Marys.

First Investiture of Novices (October 16, 1853)

From the outset, Benedicta Riepp and her two companions lacked no clarity about their "two-fold mission" at St. Marys, "namely to instruct young girls, and to spread the Benedictine order in this part of the world." Shortly after the opening of the girls' school in the fall of 1852, young women from the surrounding area expressed interest in joining the three pioneers in their way of life and their mission.

... our simple life unknown to the world aroused great attention and many women soon expressed a desire for such a life and, willing to renounce all worldly pleasures, begged to be received into our holy Order without regard to our evident poverty and the lowliness of our house.

By the time Benedicta wrote to her former teacher and friend, Bishop Karl August von Reisach of Munich-Freising (November 27, 1852), appealing for financial assistance, prospective candidates had already come to live with them in their "small house, mostly made of rough logs fastened together and covered with boards." She indicated to him their pressing need for a small convent "so that we may the better observe our holy Rule and the enclosure, and at the same time have a place to receive those young women who feel themselves called to the religious life."

The issue of accepting candidates was to become, in time, one of several major areas of contention between Wimmer and Benedicta. At this early stage, however, it is not clear whether it was Wimmer himself who accepted the first twelve candidates, or the community of the three professed women, as was the custom prescribed in the statutes of 1846. In two different letters, Wimmer reported that "they [Benedicta, Walburga, Maura] have accepted twelve candidates," and then further indicated that Benedicta had
met with disapproval from her European superiors because she, "at my urging, opened a novitiate."\(^{55}\) In these letters Wimmer seems somewhat high-handed toward the Eichstätt community whose intent it had been to found a "dependent house of our Order devoted especially to the education and formation of young German girls."\(^{56}\) Wimmer boasted that "even in danger of being separated from St. Walburg, I urged the establishing of their own novitiate, and the maintaining of their self-government."\(^{57}\) Two days after his letter to King Ludwig on July 4, Wimmer again wrote to the Abbot of Metten and expressed his attitude toward the European Motherhouse in Eichstätt.

To the sisters of Eichstätt I expressed my opinion unreservedly: the sisters in Eichstätt are fools if they expect to understand better what is needed in America than I do here in the place and on the spot.\(^{58}\)

It is possible, however, that Wimmer's zeal for the acceptance of candidates was matched at this early stage by Benedicta's.\(^{59}\) She recognized that St. Walburg Convent could not accept the total burden of finances for their new mission at St. Marys, at the same time that she recognized the need to accept candidates who would be co-laborers with them in the furthering of the two-fold mission which had brought them to America. Therefore, she had a plan for the purchasing of a few acres of land and for the building of a new convent. Three months before candidates began arriving, Benedicta wrote to the President of the Council of the Ludwig-Missionsverein requesting a sum of $2,500 to meet the immediate need of a new building.\(^{60}\) In the meantime, King Ludwig had already asked the Ludwig-Missionsverein to send a donation of 8000 florin to Benedicta at St. Marys.\(^{61}\) Had Boniface Wimmer not intercepted the money for the building of two mills in his own plan,\(^{62}\) the new community might have been able to finance the building of a more adequate convent immediately. As it was, the expanding community had no choice but to remain in the upper story of the original frame building, with some additional living and school space provided in buildings nearby.\(^{63}\)

The nature of the candidacy or postulancy of the first twelve women to enter St. Joseph Convent at St. Marys is not known. It is probable that there was little difference between the life style of the professed members of the community and the candidates. They were all affected in a variety of ways by their condition of extreme poverty and were often hampered in their work because they lacked resources. Nevertheless, the fledgling community
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experienced its first ceremony of investiture on October 16, 1853. Boniface Wimmer presided at the ceremony which was held in the parish church. Less than fifteen months after the arrival of Benedicta, Walburga and Maura, this single event increased the membership of the community to fifteen sisters—an encouraging number "which gave rise to fondest hopes and prospects."  

Boniface Wimmer's letters to the Abbot of Metten and to King Ludwig reported that eleven of the new candidates were American-born and that one had come from Bavaria. Extant records on these women reveal a different configuration of backgrounds. Six of them were American-born: Josepha (Elizabeth) Buerkle, Mechtild (Catherine) Richter, Gregoria (Magdalene) Moser, Placida (Catherine) Graber, Boniface (Mary) Cassidy, and Bernarda Weidenboerner. The European-born candidates were Benedicta (Suzanna) Burkhard, Gertrude (Julia) Kapser, Eduarda Redant, and Luitgarde Butsch. The place of birth for Adelgunda Leschall and Hildegarde Renner is not extant.

The ages of this first group of novices ranged from twenty-one to thirteen. Seven of the novices were under eighteen years of age, while the average age in the group was approximately seventeen. The average age in the community as a whole was only twenty-one. The status is known for nine of the fifteen members—six were choir sisters and three were lay.

Benedicta Riepp reflected on the situation of the community at this time in a letter written to the Ludwig-Missionsverein two months after the community’s first ceremony of investiture.

After many trials and often even with great sacrifices and their own complete self-surrender, twelve young women have been accepted into the convent; twelve have already received the holy habit and four others will receive it in a short time. Many of these young women are native Americans and speak German and English. Both languages are indispensable in America; without them no institute in America can accomplish its purpose. It is, therefore, of great importance for us to accept girls for our Order who are thoroughly conversant in both languages. May the dear God permit it that soon we can move into a more spacious convent so that we will be able to accept more candidates into our Order....

Although there are no extant letters from the community at St. Marys to the Motherhouse in Eichstätt asking for more members and money, there is evidence that some appeal was made. Priorress Eduarda Schnitzer, writing to King Ludwig as early as October 27, 1852, refers to being "moved by the most recent
reports and the urgent requests of our poor sisters in St. Marys.”

Not finding themselves in a position to lend financial aid, Prioress Edwarda expressed her own and the community’s deep gratitude to King Ludwig for his promised gift of 8000 florin. However, the community in Eichstätt was far from abandoning what they had begun in North America. It was only a couple of weeks after the first investiture of novices at St. Marys, that Prioress Edwarda revealed her plan and placed her request to the Ludwig-Missionsverein for funds to finance the sending of “some other members of my convent who will soon depart for St. Marys to help the sisters there who are burdened with work.”

Second Group from Eichstätt (1854)

Prioress Edwarda Schnitzer’s request for funds from the Ludwig-Missionsverein to finance the sending of a second group of Eichstätt Benedictines to America was carefully thought out and articulated. She named a choir sister, Scholastica Burkhard, two lay sisters, Alexia Lechner and Lidwina Uhl, and a candidate, Barbara Koegel in her letter of request, and detailed four reasons to justify the need for funds: 1) the already limited means at the disposal of St. Walburg Convent, 2) the inability to completely disregard the requests of the daughterhouse at St. Marys, 3) the limited dowries of the four women she identified, most of which had already been used for their novitiate training, 4) the need to provide for the lack of prepared teaching personnel in their own convent caused by the departure of trained teachers.

The written consent of Bishop Georg von Oettl and his permission for the departure of the four women named accompanied Prioress Edwarda’s letter to the Ludwig-Missionsverein. The Bishop was enthusiastic in his recommendation of “these pious, and in every respect, highly commendable sisters.” The response of the Ludwig-Missionsverein to Prioress Edwarda’s request is not extant. However, two months later, on November 26, 1853, the second contingent of women from St. Walburg Convent did indeed leave Eichstätt, enroute to St. Marys in Pennsylvania.

The findings of relatively recent research suggest that not one but three candidates accompanied Scholastica, Alexia, and
Lidwina—Barbara Koegel, Ottilia Lechner, and Crescence Beyerle. The Catalogues of 1879 and 1903 included two women, Xavier Lechner and Stanislaus Kostka Beyerle, for whom data other than the date of profession was non-existent. As recently as 1965, and in response to a questionnaire sent by the archivist of St. Joseph Monastery, St. Marys, PA, Abbess Augustina Weihermülle of St. Walburg Abbey, Eichstatt, listed three candidates as members of the group that left from there in November of 1853. It is quite possible that Ottilia was the older sister of Alexia Lechner, one of the three professed women in the group. Exactly why Ottilia and Crescence were not mentioned in the letters of Prioress Edwarda and Bishop von Oettl can only be conjectured. Barbara Koegel was, perhaps, explicitly mentioned because she had completed her formal application to enter the convent in Eichstätt. The other two women probably accompanied the group intending to make their formal application for entrance at St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, PA.

The second contingent of Benedictine women from Eichstätt reached New York City on January 6, 1854. They were welcomed there by their new superior, Benedicta Riepp, and the prior of the monks at St. Marys, Benedict Haindl, O.S.B. Together they reached St. Marys on January 13, 1854. With the arrival of six additional women from Eichstätt the community at St. Marys numbered twenty-five women. The convent was far too small and in “a remarkably short time the community had to build an addition to their simple wooden convent. The annex was but one story and an attic.” The new arrivals “found an abundance of work awaiting them.” Scholastica Burkhard, a “highly educated woman,” assisted in the teaching and assumed the responsibility of training the candidates. Alexia Lechner taught the primary classes, while Lidwina Uhl became the portress and infirmarian. Exactly what role the novices and postulants had in the work of the community at this time is not known. However, “the community soon found its members overburdened with tasks even with the increased membership.”
Second Investiture of Novices (February 10, 1854)

Writing to the Ludwig-Missionsverein on December 15, 1853, Benedicta Riepp anticipated the clothing of four more novices. At that time she had not known that Barbara Koegel, the candidate from Eichstätt, would be the fifth new novice to be invested on February 10, 1854, receiving the name, Willibalda. She and Cunigunda Lebus, also invested on this date, were to be the first two women to die at St. Marys. Willibalda Koegel lived only sixteen months after her investiture and died at age twenty-seven. Considerably younger, Cunigunda died at age twenty-one, a little more than two years after she became a novice. The specific causes of their deaths are not known, but the majority of youthful deaths during the pioneer period were caused by pulmonary tuberculosis.

This group of novices was distinguished both by a historic “first” and a “last.” Ruperta (Mary) Albert had entered the community along with Augustine (Mary Jane) Short on October 13, 1853, three days before the clothing of the first twelve novices, and she would be the last to die of the women who comprised the first and only community of Benedictine women in America between 1852 and 1856. She was only eighteen when she became a novice, and was three months short of her ninetieth birthday when she died. An eye witness of the earliest days of Benedictine women in America, she would live to experience the first seventy-two years of the 140-year history of American Benedictine women.

Adelberta Glatt is one of the “many mysteries” of the early membership at St. Marys. Biographical data seems to have been misplaced, altered or lost due to her eventual assignments to Newark and Chicago. Established data, however, includes her date and place of birth in Bavaria, and her year of entrance at St. Marys, 1853. Although inconclusive, one source lists her investiture among the five women clothed on February 10, 1854.

The addition of three American-born women eased somewhat the urgent need for English-speaking members, for “after this increase the nuns were able to teach classes in English and to accept the charge of the public schools.” Nevertheless, the momentum of increasing membership built to the point of receiving still another group of five novices only eight months later.
The Reshaping of a Tradition

Third Investiture of Novices (October 15, 1854)

The ages of the candidates received as novices on October 15, 1854, ranged from forty to thirteen: Alphonsa (Margaret) Hussey, Theresa (Margaret) Vogel, Salesia Haas, Adelaid Silber, and Kiliana [Eger]. Of the fifth candidate in this group nothing more than the name given her at this time of investiture, Kiliana, is known. In a letter to Baron Rudolph von Oberkamp, business manager of the Ludwig-Missionsverein, Boniface Wimmer mentions a novice by the name of Chiliana Eger, who could conceivably be the Kiliana of this investiture group. Wimmer was writing in defense of his own position regarding the procedure of accepting candidates, and therefore retraced his role in the matter from the outset. He claimed to have had nothing to do with the acceptance of “Chiliana who, according to the opinion of wise people, has no true vocation. . . . I did not recommend her and counseled many times that she be dismissed, but it did not happen.” Later on in the same letter he refers to having spoken to “Sister Chiliana Eger, whom I reprimanded for the obstinacy in wanting not to make simple vows but solemn profession immediately.” Presumably, Kiliana left the convent before professing vows, since her name ceases to appear in any records after October 15, 1854.

First Profession of Vows (December 30, 1854)

None of the historical accounts cited thus far documents the first instance of a ceremony of profession at St. Joseph Convent in St. Marys, PA. However, Benedicta Riepp, writing to Karl August von Reisach on January 7, 1855, refers to the event as having transpired: ”. . . at present we have twenty-one novices, of whom eleven have already made simple vows for one year.” There is no extant account of the nature of this ceremony, but December 30, 1854, as the date on which it occurred appears verifiable. Records indicate that the following professed vows on this date: Benedicta Burkhard, Josepha Buerkle, Adelgunda Leschall, Gertrude Kapser, Mechtild Richter, Gregoria Moser, Placida Graber, Boniface Cassidy, Edwarda Redant, Luitgarde Butsch and
Bernarda Weidenboerner. These were eleven of the twelve candidates who had been invested on October 16, 1853. The twelfth novice of the group, Hildegarde Renner, had left the convent some time between August 7 and December 30, 1854.

In the same letter to Archbishop von Reisach, Benedicta Riepp reported the presence of seven candidates, in addition to the eleven newly professed sisters and ten novices. Two of the candidates were Ottilia Lechner and Crescence Beyerle who had arrived with the group from Eichstätt on January 13, 1854. On October 7, 1854, three candidates from the “old imperial city of Ulm joined the ranks to make an offering of their youth and talents to God in the stillness of cloistered life.” They were Mary Ann Kremmmer, Mary Teresa Ludwig and Mary Mayer. Exactly when Cordula Bernhard and a candidate with the family name of Massenhauser arrived is not known. Five of these seven candidates were soon to become the fourth group of new novices.

*Fourth Investiture of Novices (February 10, 1855)*

*Second Profession of Vows*

The feast of St. Scholastica in 1855 was the occasion of a double event for the rapidly growing community. Four of the novices who had been invested exactly one year earlier professed first vows—Augustine Short, Ruperta Albert, Adelberta Glatt, and Cunigunda Lebus. The “three young women from Schwaben, together with two others were admitted to the ranks of the Order” by way of investiture: Evangelista (Mary Ann) Kremmmer, Nepomucene (Mary Teresa) Ludwig, Baptista (Mary) Mayer, Romana (Cordula) Bernhard and Meinrada Massenhauser.

Although this latest investiture raised the community’s membership to thirty-four, it was “still insufficient to handle the fast-mounting enrollment” in the school. In less than a month, plans were finalized to send a third contingent of women from St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt to the “newly founded dependent convent, St. Marys in America.” When Prioress Edwarda made her third appeal for funds from the Ludwig-Missionsverein in early March of 1855, plans had already been made for five members of
St. Walburg Convent to accompany Boniface Wimmer to North America on his return trip from Europe. In late January or early February Wimmer had left for Europe, bound ultimately for Rome where he was determined to settle the issue of having St. Vincent’s Monastery raised to the rank of abbey. He arrived in Munich on February 25 where he remained for a month, consulting with the secretary and directors of the Ludwig-Missionsverein. The convent in Eichstätt had only to wait for Wimmer to finish his business in Rome in order to act out again, by way of sending still more personnel with him, their deep concern for the welfare of “the dependent convent founded in St. Marys.”

Meanwhile, at St. Marys two more novices were invested on May 24, 1855. Ottilia Lechner and Crescence Beyerle had arrived with the second group from Eichstätt on January 13, 1854, the date recorded as their entrance into postulancy. Just why their investiture had been delayed for over a year is not known, and who presided at the ceremony in Boniface Wimmer’s absence is another mystery.

The year 1855 held some unique hardships for the community at St. Marys. Their only income, which until now had been provided from the public tax, was withdrawn due to Benedicta Riepp’s refusal to submit her sisters to the scrutiny of the superintendent who was a member of the Know-Nothing Party. In this year also the young community experienced the death of Willibald Koegel. Presumably, the community had also experienced the loss of Hildegard Reiner and Kiliana [Eger], who left convent life before profession of vows.

**Third Group from Eichstätt (1855)**

By March 2, 1855, Prioress Edwarda Schnitzer from St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt had already named the five women designated to join their sisters in America. She had also obtained the permission of Bishop Georg von Oetttl for their departure, and had foreseen that they would travel with Boniface Wimmer on his return trip to America in the fall.
Priores Edwarda again listed five reasons in justification of her appeal to the Ludwig-Missionsverein for funds to cover the traveling expenses of the sisters.\(^\text{107}\) That she still regarded St. Marys a dependency in her charge is clear in her letter of March 2, 1855.

The dependent convent founded in St. Marys still comes to us, as in the past, for support. I cannot close my heart to these, my fellow sisters. I must make some contributions there. That is now the case, when I must properly furnish clothing and other necessities for the sisters who are now emigrating. Many of these sisters at their entrance brought nothing or but very little to the convent; the burden of expenses, therefore, falls upon this convent.\(^\text{108}\)

On March 8, 1855, the Bishop of Eichstätt attached a postscript and signature to Priores Edwarda's letter assuring the Ludwig-Missionsverein that her "request is highly deserving of your kindest regard."\(^\text{109}\) In early August of 1855 Boniface Wimmer finished his business in Rome and returned to Munich.\(^\text{110}\) One final item of business before he left Rome on August 6 was the drafting of a letter to Cardinal Barnabo of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, stating his reasons for desiring the separation of St. Joseph Convent in St. Marys from St. Walburg's in Eichstätt.\(^\text{111}\) During the three months that followed, Wimmer visited and solicited financial aid from various abbeys in Bavaria and Austria. Meanwhile, Bishop Georg von Oettl formalized his approval of the departure of five more members from St. Walburg's in a letter to Bishop Josue Young of Erie.

\[\ldots\] We, granting their petitions, having held a council with the prioress and conventuals of our monastery, after proper examination of the above-named religious, are sending them in the Lord, nevertheless on these conditions: that they cease not to observe their sacred vows of religion strictly and that they fulfill especially their vow of obedience most religiously to the new superior, which they had vowed to the prioress. We, therefore, earnestly commend these religious \ldots to the Most Reverend and Illustrious Lord Ordinary of the diocese, to whose jurisdiction they have been transferred, asking that he vouchsafe to receive them as daughters in his paternal heart and cherish them with apostolic charity.\(^\text{112}\)

Bound for Eichstätt to meet and accompany the third group of nuns to America, Boniface Wimmer left Munich on October 25, 1855.\(^\text{113}\) A couple days later the group left Eichstätt joined by a young woman from the Ursuline Convent of Landshut, and a
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sixty-year-old nun from the Ursuline Convent of Gratz in Steuermark” who was accompanied by her niece.

The Very Reverend Confessor [Francis Anthony Schmid, S.J.], Mother Fridolin and I [Prioress Edwarda Schnitzer] accompanied them to Pleinfeld. We had two vehicles. In the coach were the young lady Luisa [Aloysia] Knapp and Emmerana Bader, Willibald Scherbauer, Philomena Spiegel, Katherina Schoenhofer, the young woman Frau Gratz, Mother Fridolin, and I myself, as companion. In our own chaise, were the Lord Abbot Boniface Wimmer, the Reverend Confessor, the 60-year-old nun from Gratz and the young lady from Landshut.114

Wimmer, writing aboard the steamer Washington on November 21, 1855, described some of the details and difficulty of the trip.

We left Bremen on November 1 and were in Bremerhaven at four o’clock in the afternoon. From there we left on the Washington.... Soon we were on the high seas, and a storm broke out from the east. It made all of my companions sick. It continued for twenty-four hours. At noon on the 4th we were in Southampton, where all the sick recovered, and at three o’clock on the 7th we left for America. Having arrived in the Channel, we were greeted by a strong wind which has continued ever since and, to be sure, against us. On the 13th came a mighty storm which subsided for a few hours, only to return all the worse particularly during the nights of the 16th, 17th, and 18th... our trip will be a long lonely one.... Not till tonight or tomorrow will we come to the banks of Newfoundland and perhaps only Sunday to New York. The Washington is a very good ship; otherwise it would have been wrecked yesterday. But it sails slowly.115

This account by Wimmer provides a glimpse at what the five Benedictine women on board were experiencing on the way to their new home in America.116 Having come from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences, they were one in purpose aboard the steamer Washington.

Willibald (Franziska) Scherbauer and Emmerana (Josefa) Bader117 had probably been in the charge of Benedicta Riepp when she was novice mistress in Eichstatt, since the former became a novice on May 20, 1850, and the latter on November 1, 1851. Severe misunderstandings were to develop between these two women at St. Marys, due in part to the very different backgrounds from which they came. Willibald was the daughter of Graf Scherbauer, a government minister of finance in Kastl, Bavaria. Well educated and accomplished in music, she was being
missioned to America to teach music to the daughters of impoverished German immigrants. From quite another background, Emmerana was the daughter of a Bavarian tanner, and had little formal schooling. She was being sent to America “for housework.”

Philomena (Karolina) Spiegel was the third professed member of the group, and Aloysia Knapp and Katharina Schoenhofer were candidates. The Eichstätt chronicle failed to mention the role Philomena was destined to fill at St. Marys, but the roles to be assumed by the two candidates in the group were clearly delineated—Aloysia Knapp “for music and housework,” and Katharina Schoenhofer, “teacher of clarinet.”

This third entourage from Eichstätt, after having experienced enroute to America “the worst succession of storms for eighteen days,” landed in New York on November 28. For the five Benedictine women in the group encountering the American scene for the first time, the experiences of the next two weeks must have been more than a little bewildering. They were not to see their Benedictine sisters at St. Marys until December 16.

I [Boniface Wimmer] had to spend nine days in New York before I got my baggage from the customs and had to pay $213 duty for it. I arrived at St. Vincent on December 6th at twelve o’clock noon and was received with sincerest joy. All the Fathers . . . were present, as well as a large crowd of German and even English Catholics, who wished to express their joy over the successful outcome of my trip. Of course, we went to church first. Then we had a joyous meal at which the students of our institution presented the finest selections of music with real perfection. In between these, declamations were given in Greek, Latin, German, English, French and Italian. Then toasts were given to those whom we owe the good outcome of our cause.

Unfortunately, there exists no description of the welcome received by Willibalda, Emmerana, Philomena, Aloysia and Katharina when they finally reached St. Joseph Convent at St. Marys on December 16, 1855. Their arrival increased the membership of the community to forty, and from that time on the Eichstätt motherhouse was no longer asked for help. From 1855 on, changes in the religious life of the sisters in America indicate a clear break from the way of life to which they had been accustomed at the Eichstätt Motherhouse.
Community Profile at the Close of 1855

In a letter to the Ludwig-Missionsverein two months after the arrival of the third and last group, Benedicta Riepp reflected on the burgeoning growth of the community at St. Marys.

I would not have accepted so many [members], if I had not realized daily more and more the great need for schools and institutes for girls. So I found it difficult to refuse acceptance into our Order to young women who showed signs of a vocation to the religious life and in whom I also recognized abilities for teaching. Thus, I would also then deny them the opportunity of devoting themselves to a higher calling. Most of our novices have good talents, and a few have very many talents, so I can hope after a short time to be able to do much good for young girls. 123

This chapter’s focus on the women who constituted Benedicta’s new community of “young women who showed signs of a vocation” and who possessed “good talents” yields a fascinating profile. A total of fourteen members had been contributed by the Motherhouse in Eichstätt, and the remaining twenty-six had come to St. Marys from the surrounding area, apparently having been attracted by a life style “completely devoted to God’s service and the welfare of others.” 124

Twenty-seven of the forty women were European-born, fourteen of whom had entered the convent in Eichstätt. 125 The others had emigrated to America with family or friends before their entrance into the Benedictine community at St. Marys. Nineteen of these women were Bavarian-born, five came from the Kingdom of Württemberg, and one each from Alsace, Belgium, and Ireland. Ten of the members were born in America—seven in Pennsylvania, and one each in Ohio, Maryland, and New York.

The average age in the community at the close of 1855 was twenty-four. Walburga Dietrich was the senior member at fifty-one, the only person in that age decade. Alphonsa Hussey, a novice, was the second oldest member at the age of forty-one. She was the only woman in the forties. Four women were in their thirties, and over half the community (twenty-two) ranged in age from twenty-nine to twenty. Nine members were under twenty years of age, and the youngest, Adelaide Silber, was only fourteen.

Nine women of the community had been initiated into Benedictine life and had been professed at St. Walburg Convent in
Eichstätt. Four of these—Scholastica Burkhard, Alexia Lechner, Willibalda Scherbauer and Emmerana Bader—had received part or all of their novitiate training under the guidance of Benedicta Riepp, novice mistress at St. Walburg’s from 1849 to June of 1852.

At the close of 1855, fifteen members had completed their canonically required year of novitiate at St. Marys and had professed first vows. The average age of the newly professed was nineteen. Eleven women were novices at this time and surprisingly, the average age among them was twenty-six. The two candidates who had arrived with the third group from Eichstätt—Aloysia Knapp and Katharina Schoenhofer—were awaiting their investiture as novices.

In actuality, forty women had entered St. Joseph Convent in St. Marys, PA, between July 22, 1852, and December 16, 1855. However, at the close of 1855 thirty-seven members remained. Hildegarde Renner and Kiliana [Eger] had left the community before profession of first vows, and Willibalda (Barbara) Koegel died on June 29, 1855, at the age of twenty-seven.

As was the custom in Eichstätt, the women continued to be identified as choir or lay sisters at the time they became novices. However, there is no certain identification for eight members of this early community. Given the available data on the remaining professed members and novices at this time, thirteen of them were choir sisters and fourteen were lay sisters.126

In the letter quoted above, Benedicta Riepp further reflected on what had been her original intent relative to the acceptance of candidates for the new community.

I also had in mind when accepting them that we should spread out farther as soon as possible. For St. Marys, 10-15 sisters would have been sufficient, considering the condition the colony finds itself in at present.127

As she wrote, Benedicta may have had in mind the eventual establishment of branch houses from the first Benedictine community of women in North America. But she could not have foreseen the enormous upheaval and change which were to characterize the community’s life within the next four years. The consequences for the individual members as well as for the community as a whole were radical and far-reaching. Between June of 1856 and December of 1859, twenty women from this new-born community would become foundresses in four new locations—Erie, PA, Newark, NJ, St. Cloud, MN, and Covington, KY. Six of
these twenty would become foundresses two or three times over. Nine women were destined to become superiors and prioresses, and seven more would die before the end of 1859.

The spirit of Eichstätt handed on to the new community in America would be further transmitted to branch houses, in the persons of Scholastica Burkhard, Emmerana Bader, Willibald Scherbauer and Alexia Lechner, who would become the first superiors of four new foundations. All four of these women had received all or part of their novitiate training under Benedicta Riepp in Eichstätt and had professed their vows there. Finally, the American founding inspiration and experience, wedded to the ancient tradition of Benedictinism in Eichstätt, would itself remain alive in the persons of thirteen of the forty pioneer women who would live on into the twentieth century.

Notes


2 The decree from the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars in Rome, dated December 6, 1859, rejected Boniface Wimmer’s petition to bring the Benedictine women in the United States into the American Cassinese Congregation of men under his own rule as its Abbot-President. Instead, the Benedictine communities of women were placed under the jurisdiction of the bishops of the dioceses in which they were established. For the English translation of the text of the decree, see appendix 3.
The following biographical data on the first forty women who comprised the community at St. Marys between 1852–1855 has been garnered from a variety of sources: entrance record books and personal data files in archives of St. Joseph Monastery, St. Marys, PA (SJMA), Mount St. Benedict Monastery, Erie, PA (MSBMA), St. Benedict’s Convent, St. Joseph, MN (SBCA), St. Gertrude Monastery, Ridgely, MD (SGMA), and St. Walburg Monastery, Covington, KY (SWMA); Baska, The Benedictine Congregation of St. Scholastica; Stephanie Campbell, O.S.B., A Love That Impels: A History of the Benedictine Sisters of Ridgely, Maryland (Erie, PA: Benet Press, 1986); Catalogue of the Nuns and Convents of the Holy Order of St. Benedict in the United States (Latrobe, PA: St. Vincent’s Abbey, 1879); Catalogue, 1903; Girgen, Behind the Beginnings; Hundredth Anniversary of the Benedictine Sisters, 1852–1952, Cradle of the Order in the United States (St. Marys, PA: Sisters of St. Benedict, St. Joseph Convent, 1952), hereafter cited 100th St. Marys; McDonald, With Lamps Burning; Morkin and Seigel, Wind in the Wheat; The Challenge: Saint Walburg Convent Centennial, 1859–1959 (Covington, KY: Sisters of St. Benedict, St. Walburg Convent, 1959).

Told to the Benedictine community at St. Joseph, MN, on the occasion of their centennial celebration, February 11, 1957, by Abbess Maria Anna Augustina Weihermüller, O.S.B., of St. Walburg Abbey, Eichstädt, Bavaria. Text of the complete message delivered to the community in SBCA, Record Group 18.

Whenever possible, the baptismal name of the women under study will be given in parentheses. It was a post-Tridentine custom to be given a special monastic name at the time of investiture (Einkleidung), the ceremony bestowing the religious habit and marking the beginning of the novitiate and official membership in the community. Hilpisch, Geschichte der Benediktinerinnen, p. 74.

The 1825 Record of Baptisms, St. Anna Church in Waal. SBCA, copy, #16-1.

Ibid. There is a discrepancy regarding family membership in another source. A letter from the pastor of the Catholic parish in Waal to the Abbess of Eichstätt, dated August 2, 1963 (SBCA, copy, #16-1) indicates that there were only three girls in the family: Maria Sybilla, born June 28, 1825; Sophia, born May 10, 1829; Juliana, born November 1, 1832. This source makes no mention of Johanna.

Pastor of Waal to Abbess of Eichstätt, August 2, 1963. SBCA, copy, #16-1.

St. Walburga: Her Life and Heritage, p. 66.

Spring and Harvest, p. 36.

Ibid., pp. 36–37.

His reform culminated in a new set of statutes drawn up specifically for the convent of St. Walburg in Eichstätt, and promulgated on July 11, 1846. A handwritten copy of the German text was located in the archives of St. Scholastica Priory, Chicago. Henceforth, this document will be cited under the title, Konstitutionen.

Ibid., pp. 79, 81.

Bishop Karl August von Reisach had been made Archbishop of Munich-Freising in 1846, and was succeeded in Eichstätt by
Bishop George von Oettl. Why he is not mentioned in Benedicta’s vow formula is not known. Another curious element in the solemn vow document is Ludovica Bauer’s title given as “subprioress” rather than “prioress.”


26 Edwarda Schnitzer was Prioress of St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt from 1849–1898. She was among the first three novices to profess vows after the restoration. She died in 1902, after four years of illness had prevented her from continuing her role as Prioress.

27 “Chronik der Benediktinerinnen der Abtei St. Walburg, Eichstätt,” cited by Baska, p. II. Hereafter cited as Chronik-Eichstätt, SWAA.

28 See appendix 4.

29 p. 70.

30 Ibid., pp. 73–74.

31 Roemer, pp. 1, 121-122.

32 Spring and Harvest, pp. 42–43. It is interesting to note that the School Sisters of Notre Dame were bound for St. Marys in Pennsylvania where they first settled in 1847. Soon after their arrival, however, the Redemptorists left the parish and since there was no one to minister to their sacramental needs, they too abandoned St. Marys. The house they vacated was to become the first American home of Benedicta, Walburga and Maura in 1852.

33 Ibid.; St. Walburga: Her Life and Heritage, p. 66.

34 Wimmer to Archbishop Karl August Von Reisach, April 5, 1852. Mathäser, pp. 49–50, n.7.; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. II.

35 The Supreme Council was the governing body of the Ludwig-Missionsverein. The Archbishop of Munich-Freising was the ex-officio president of the Council.

36 Schnitzer to Ludwig-Missionsverein, May 29, 1852. LMA, Munich, original; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 1; Eng. trans., Girgen, pp. 14–15. The Eichstätt community numbered about 42 at this time.

37 Spring and Harvest, p. 43. A florin was worth approximately 40–42 cents. Hence, approximately $378.00 was contributed by the Ludwig-Missionverein.

38 Chronik-Eichstätt, SWAA, cited by Baska, p. II.

39 This story was told to an interviewer by Sister Evangelist Kapusta, O.S.B., the current archivist at St. Joseph Monastery, St. Marys, PA, and reported in an article entitled, “The First Benedictine Order,” Roaming in Elk County: A Magazine For and About the People of Elk County 1:6 (July 1974). See also Judith Sutera, O.S.B., “Pioneers in Search of Identity,” p. 27.
40 Catalogue, 1903, p. 5; Baska, p. 12; Morkin and Seigel, p. 56.

41 O’Connor to Wimmer, July 15, 1852. St. Vincent Archabbey Archives (SVAA), Latrobe, PA, original; Eng. trans. in Baska, p. 23, McDonald, p. 297, n.13, Girgen, p. 16.

42 The Annalen der Verbreitung des Glaubens was the publication of the Ludwig-Missionsverein, first published in Munich in 1848.

43 Aug. 9, 1852. Published in Annalen 21: 25–26; Eng. trans., Girgen, pp. 16-17. There are discrepancies concerning the exact date of arrival. The more commonly accepted date is July 22, 1852, as given in the Ms. Chronicles of St. Joseph Monastery, St. Marys, PA, Catalogue, 1903, p. 5, Baska, p. 22, Burgemeister, p. 13, and Morkin and Seigel, p. 56.

44 Memoirs of Sister Nepomucene Ludwig, O.S.B., ca. 1913. Eng. trans., “Convent Foundations of the Benedictine Order in North America,” by Timothy Seus, O.S.B., p. 1. SJMA, original; SVAA and SGMA, copies. Ludwig was an eyewitness of the conditions at St. Marys in its earliest years. She became a novice at St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, PA, on February 10, 1855, less than three years after its founding.


46 Riepp to Ludwig, January 8, 1853. Geheimes Hausarchiv, Munich, original; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 3; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 27.


48 Exploration into the way of life which characterized the early months and years of Benedictine women in America is reserved for a later section of this study.

49 Ludwig, MEMOIRS, p. 2.

50 Riepp to Ludwig, January 8, 1853. Girgen, p. 27.


52 Riepp to Ludwig-Missionsverein, December 15, 1853. LMA, Munich, original; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 6; Girgen, p. 35.

53 Ibid. The earliest reference to the acceptance of twelve candidates is found in a letter by Boniface Wimmer to the Abbot of Metten, Gregor Scherr, O.S.B., dated October 17, 1852. See Morkin and Seigel, pp. 61–62; Girgen, pp. 18–19.


55 Wimmer to Scherr, October 17, 1852. Metten Abbey Archives, Metten, West Germany, original; SVAA, copy; Eng. trans. in Morkin and Seigel, pp. 61–62, and Girgen, pp. 18–19. Wimmer to Ludwig, July 4,


59 Grace McDonald in With Lamps Burning, p. 12, asserts that Benedicta regarded the acceptance of the first twelve candidates as premature, and that because St. Marys was still a dependency of St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt she believed it had no right to open a novitiate. There appears to be no evidence for this assertion in the first three extant letters of Benedicta, dated Nov. 27, 1852, Jan. 8, 1853 and Dec. 15, 1853. In the first and third of these letters she refers to the acceptance of candidates quite matter-of-factly and with a hint of eagerness. It is true that the issue of acceptance of postulants and investiture of novices eventually became a major "point of difference" between Wimmer and Riepp, but only later (about 1856-1857) and in connection with the larger problem of Wimmer's assumed jurisdiction over all the Benedictine women in America. See Girgen, pp. 110-112.


63 Ibid., p. 28.

64 Ms. Chronicles, St. Joseph Monastery, St. Marys, PA, cited by Baska, p. 35. According to 100th St. Marys, Wimmer was delegated to receive these women by Bishop Michael O'Connor of Erie.

65 Ludwig, MEMOIRS, p. 2.

66 Wimmer to Scherr, October 17, 1852. Girgen, pp. 18-19; Wimmer to Ludwig, July 4, 1853. Girgen, p. 29.

67 SJMA. According to the statutes of 1846, the superior was required to keep a record of the baptismal and religious names of the novices, as well as the family name, place of birth, age, parents' occupation, and dates of entrance, investiture and profession. (Konstitutionen, p. 81). In the light of these entrance records, not only is the accuracy of Wimmer's information at issue in his letter of October 17, 1852, but also the accuracy of the letter's date. If this letter was, indeed, written in 1852 then we are led to believe that the first twelve candidates arrived at St. Marys
within the short space of three months. Six of the twelve candidates whose entrance dates are extant arrived between February 14 and July 17 of 1853. Wimmer speaks also in this letter about the establishment of a novitiate as if it were already a fact by October 17, 1852. The first twelve novices, however, were invested a full year later, on October 16, 1853.

Variant spellings of family names in archival records occur frequently. For example, in some instances Burkhard is spelled Burkhardt, Buerkle varies from Buerekle to Birkle, and Leschall has at least three other variants—Leshall, Lejeal and Lejal. The spelling of all names used in the text of this study are those preferred down to the present day in the archives of the various communities to which these women were eventually dispersed. For basic biographical data, see appendix 4.

69 Girgen, p. 22.
70 October 28, 1853. LMA, Munich, original; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 4; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 31.
71 Ibid. See appendix 4 for biographical data on the four women named. Since Scholastica Burkhard had entered the novitiate in Eichštatt on May 20, 1850, and Alexia Lechner on January 6, 1852, it can be concluded that Benedicta Riepp had been their novice mistress until she left for America on June 12, 1852.
72 von Oettl to Ludwig-Missionsverein, October 29, 1853. LMA, Munich, original; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 5; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 32.
73 See appendix 4 for biographical data.
74 This information was supplied by Sister M. Evangelist Kapusta, O.S.B., current archivist of SJMA in a letter to this author dated November 17, 1986.
75 Ludwig, MEMOIRS, p. 5.
76 The four candidates who were to be invested the following month had already arrived.
77 Catalogue, 1903, p. 6.
78 Baska, p. 30.
79 Girgen, p. 35.
80 See appendix 4.
81 Ibid.
82 Evangelist Kapusta, O.S.B., to this author, March 30, 1987.
83 Campbell, A Love that Impels, pp. 40–42.
84 See appendix 4.
86 SJMA. This information seems plausible, since the accepted date of her triennial vows is February 10, 1855 (Catalogue, 1903), and the extant document of her final vows is dated February 10, 1858.

87 Ms. Chronicle, SJMA. Baska, p. 35.

88 See appendix 4.

89 SJMA


91 LMA, Munich, original; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 7; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 39.

92 SJMA

93 In a letter to von Reisach, dated August 7, 1854, Wimmer lists her among the group of novices who entertained Bishop Josue Young when he visited St. Marys in mid-July of the same year. Mathäser, p. 60, n. 7; Eng. trans., Girgen, pp. 37-38.


95 Ludwig, MEMOIRS, p. 6. Mary Teresa Ludwig eventually became Nepomucene Ludwig, the author of these MEMOIRS.

96 SJMA. Unfortunately, there are no extant vow documents to verify this information recorded in the Ms. Chronicles of St. Joseph Convent.

97 Ludwig, MEMOIRS, p. 6.


99 See appendix 4.

100 Morkin and Seigel, p. 68.

101 Schnitzer to Ludwig-Missionsverein, March 2, 1855. LMA, Munich, original; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 8; Eng. trans., Girgen, pp. 42–43.

102 Ibid., p. 43.

103 Oetgen, An American Abbot, p. 111. Another issue Wimmer desired action on while he was in Rome was that of having St. Joseph Convent in St. Marys officially declared independent of St. Walburg in Eichstätt—an issue which would not be settled until 1859.


105 SJMA

106 Riepp to von Reisach, May 20, 1855, LMA, Munich, original; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 10; Eng. trans., Girgen, pp. 45–46. See also Riepp to Ludwig-Missionsverein, May 21, 1855. LMA, Munich, original; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 11; Eng. Trans., Girgen, pp. 46–48. Benedicta Riepp’s confrontation with the Know-Nothing Party will be further discussed in chapter III.

Girgen, p. 42.

Ibid., p. 44.


Wimmer to Barnabo, August 1, 1855. University of Notre Dame Archives (UNDA); SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 12; Eng. trans., Girgen, pp. 50–51.

von Oettl to Young, October 6, 1855. SVAA, cited in Baska, pp. 31–32, McDonald, p. 13, and Girgen, p. 53. Relative to the future discussion of the jurisdiction of the Benedictine women in America, it is worth noting here that the Bishop of Eichstätt very explicitly placed them under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Erie rather than under Boniface Wimmer.

Wimmer to Ludwig, May 30, 1856. SVAA. SBCA, copy, P-Wimmer.

Chronik-Eichstätt, MS 9a, SWAA. Eng. trans., Girgen p. 41.

Wimmer to Demetrius di Marogna, Prior of St. Vincent’s Monastery in Latrobe, PA. SJAA, original. SBCA, copy, P-Wimmer.

As is so often the case, letters and diaries written by the women themselves simply have not been preserved. Therefore, indirect access to the experiences of these women is all we have to piece together their stories.

See appendix 4 for biographical data.

Chronik-Eichstätt, MS 9a, SWAA. Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 41.

See appendix 4.

Wimmer to Ludwig, May 30, 1856. SVAA; SBCA, copy, P-Wimmer.

Ibid. Presumably, the women were a captive audience at Wimmer’s homecoming festivities. In his letter aboard the *Washington*, Wimmer wrote thus to Prior di Marogna: “I will stay in New York till I have secured the crates and put them on the train.... I will come as soon as possible after that to see you and all my dear ones again. The five Benedictine nuns and the two Ursulines, as well as Scholz and the boy, will come with me. I am bringing $400 along for the Benedictine nuns” (November 21, 1855. See n. 115). The “good outcome of our cause” to which Wimmer referred here was the raising of St. Vincent Monastery to the status of an independent abbey and his appointment as the first American Abbot for three years.

Girgen, p. 48.
February 14, 1856. LMA, Munich, original; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 15; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 54.

Riepp to Ludwig-Missionsverein, December 15, 1853. Girgen, p. 35.

Data relative to place and date of birth in this profile is available for 37 out of the 40 women. Date and place of birth are not extant for Adelgunda Leschall, Hildegarde Renner, and Kiliana [Eger].

There is evidence to indicate that eventually the identification of at least three lay sisters was changed to choir status—Alexia Lechner (Catalogue, 1879, p. 30), Philomena Spiegel (Catalogue, 1879, p. 20) and Mechtild Richter (Lynch, The Leaven, p. 48).

Riepp to Ludwig-Missionsverein, February 14, 1856. Girgen, p. 54.
Chapter III

Women Uprooted and Scattered: 1856–1859

To “spread the Benedictine Order in this part of the world” was clearly in the consciousness of Benedicta Riepp as one component of the twofold mission that brought her and her companions from St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt to St. Joseph Convent in St. Marys, PA.¹ Benedicta also knew this same goal to be the motivating force behind certain activities of Boniface Wimmer on their behalf.² For both Benedicta and Boniface, furthering this aim meant the almost immediate acceptance of novices and the task of acquainting them with the Rule of Benedict and the way of life prescribed in it.

Given the centuries-long tradition of autonomous Benedictine convents and monasteries, a hallmark stemming from the Rule of Benedict itself, it was not at all unusual for Boniface Wimmer to have his mind set on the eventual independence of the American houses, and for Benedicta Riepp to have thought, early on in the process of accepting candidates, that “we should spread out farther as soon as possible.”³ These leaders were reflecting a tradition that had long encouraged the separation of a new community from its founding house as soon as the new
house was self-supporting. The wisdom behind the severance of dependent ties was the conviction that the new community then "more readily lost its foreign character, identified itself with the people, and recruited its new members from the people in whose midst it worked."^4

There is little doubt that both Benedicta Riepp and Boniface Wimmer shared the traditional vision of Benedictine autonomy and identification with the people of a particular locale. However, the eventual clash and conflict between them seems to have gathered momentum around the issues of timing, and precisely under whose initiative and authority decisions were to be made. Exactly what precipitated the first departure of five members from St. Marys to Erie, PA, can only be conjectured. The story of the uprooting and dispersal of an additional fifteen members and the subsequent painful beginnings of three more new foundations before the end of 1859 merits careful exploration.

In the previous chapter it was noted that people are the bearers of a tradition at any given stage of its history. Insofar as they mediate the essential values of the tradition, they are the primary agents in the process of reshaping. This chapter's story clearly demonstrates how conflict and seemingly negative circumstances constituted a second major force behind the reshaping of Benedictine life among women in nineteenth-century America.

It is difficult to determine the precise causes of the early conflict between Benedicta Riepp and Boniface Wimmer. It is surely an oversimplification to suggest that the root cause of the controversy was a personality clash. Too little is known, or can be known from the body of correspondence to conclude that Benedicta was a difficult personality. Nonetheless, it is quite clear that she had a strong conviction about preserving the autonomy of the women's communities when it came to matters of internal governance. She did not hesitate to take action on behalf of her sisters, even at the risk of alienating those who claimed authority over them.

Many sources do suggest, however, that Boniface Wimmer was not a man for whom dialogue and collaboration were priorities. He was autocratic in his style of leadership, often seduced by the prospect of personal power, and volatile in temperament. There is no evidence to suggest that he harbored a natural antipathy toward Benedicta from the outset, but he appears to have
been threatened by her strong-willed, independent and autonomous decisions, and thus judged her actions as acts of disobedience and defiance.

The events of 1856 to 1859 must be viewed within the context of the growing tension between Benedicta and Boniface over the main issue of jurisdiction, and the more specific questions about 1) the acceptance of new members, 2) the nature of the enclosure, 3) claustral discipline, 4) the transfer of sisters, 5) the appointment of superiors, 6) finances, and 7) certain unfair accusations leveled against Benedicta “immediately before her departure from St. Marys as well as after her departure.” The story of these years is integral to the thesis of this book, for the dispersal of approximately half of the forty women who comprised the seminal community at St. Marys, reshaped the community geographically and organizationally. Moreover, the experience of dispersal demanded new forms of adaptation which resulted in a reshaped expression of the essential values of the Benedictine vision.

First American Daughterhouse: Erie, PA

The seemingly precipitous transferal of five women from St. Marys to Erie, PA, by Benedicta Riepp in June of 1856 must be seen against the backdrop of several pertinent factors: 1) Benedicta’s growing ambivalence about the suitability of St. Marys as the place for a viable Benedictine community, 2) requests for sisters to establish a school in Erie, from Bishop Josue Young and Francis Joseph Hartman, pastor of St. Mary’s parish, 3) Boniface Wimmer’s increasing interference in the lives of the women at St. Marys and their relationship to the Eichstätt motherhouse, and 4) the departure of Prior Demetrius di Marogna and companions from St. Vincent Monastery, Latrobe, PA, on April 5, 1856, for the purpose of undertaking a new monastic settlement in Minnesota.
Benedicta Riepp’s Ambivalence

Benedicta Riepp’s ambivalence about the new community’s location at St. Marys first manifested itself in her earliest extant letter to King Ludwig I of Bavaria. Within a single paragraph she speculated that “years will pass before our gloomy, terrible region will be made somewhat brighter,” and in a heroic effort to muster courage she stated that “it is, in spite of this, a paradise, because we find ourselves happy and peaceful in our vocation.”

In December of the same year she wrote the following to the Ludwig-Missionsverein:

In comparison with Germany, however, the place resembles a wilderness. One can aptly apply here the German expression: ‘The world here is hemmed in by trees’—insofar as the enormous forests surround the whole colony—with only three roads leading to more open and more cultivated regions. The forests are almost all pine trees, five to six feet in diameter, and when they are cut down and the soil is cultivated, the hundreds and thousands of stumps stand in freshness of life as though they meant to remain masters of the place for many years.

Two years later the future looked somewhat brighter as she reported to Bishop Karl August von Reisach of Munich-Freising:

Our German compatriots are very satisfied and happy that their daughters are receiving this instruction and education from religious women. . . . St. Marys is a very suitable place for a novitiate because it is so secluded and remote from the noisy bustle of life in the city. Although the American moneyseekers look with scorn and disdain upon St. Marys . . . it is not the least of the settlements since almost all are Catholic.

Within four months of these words, however, the situation at St. Marys worsened dramatically and Benedicta’s discouragement was evidenced in another letter to von Reisach. The struggling community had suffered an unexpected blow stemming from the policies of the Know-Nothing Party in the area. Their only income had been withdrawn because Benedicta refused to have her sisters examined by a member of the Party who had been appointed school superintendent by the state.

I could not, at least immediately, permit this, since other religious women have not so far consented to it. . . . This is a serious matter, especially here in a free country, that we Catholics, and in particular we sisters, should have to submit to examination by such a man who is a member of an organization considered the worst in the
whole world. . . . In this situation, it is hardly possible for us to re­
main. . . . Our convent is too young to be divided. The people here
do what they can because they fear we might leave them, as did the
School Sisters, but they are themselves too poor to give us much fi­
nancial support.11

Benedicta’s ambivalence about remaining in St. Marys seems
most clearly expressed in the letter she wrote to the Ludwig­
Missionsverein the day after the above letter to von Reisach.

Without doubt, our material needs would be better provided for in
larger cities, but I feel sorry for the poor children who would grow
up like Indians in the forest as soon as we would leave this place. 
The School Sisters (of Notre Dame) did leave; and if I did not con­
sider it the special dispensation of God that directed us to this place
to erect our first convent, I too would prefer to transfer to a city; but
for the sake of the dear youth we must make a sacrifice.12

Two more years were to pass before Benedicta would reveal
the undeniable truth of the five years she had spent in the “ter­
rible region” of St. Marys: “I feel very disturbed and under a
strain here, so much the more since I never was very happy at St.
Marys and never had a desire to be here.”13

Early Invitations to Erie

It is difficult to determine whether or not Benedicta really foresaw
a more viable option for the relocation of her young community
before mid-year of 1856. There exists an account, however, of an
early visit to St. Joseph Convent in St. Marys, PA, by Bishop Josue
Young of Erie on July 12 to 16 of the year 1854—only two years
after the arrival of the first Benedictine women. The occasion of
the visit was the dedication of the new church at St. Marys. His
visit may also have been the first step in a process which eventu­
ally brought Benedictines from St. Marys to Erie.

He ‘boarded’ with the sisters and ‘roomed’ with the brothers. The
Lady Superior did her utmost to show him hospitality and to enter­
tain him. . . . He would like to have our Benedictine sisters also in
Erie because he was very pleased with their achievements, espe­
cially in the arts and crafts . . . 14

Whether Benedicta or Boniface seriously considered this early in­
vitation to send sisters to Erie is not known. However, Benedicta
was to be clearly reminded of it by Bishop Young himself two
years later.15
A second early appeal to send sisters to Erie came to Benedicta from Francis Joseph Hartmann, the pastor of St. Mary's Parish in Erie, who needed teachers for his school on East Ninth Street. To Benedicta Riepp these requests must surely have indicated the possibility of expansion and a "way out" of St. Marys for their rapidly expanding and increasingly poverty-stricken community. The time to act, however, was obviously not in 1854.

**Boniface Wimmer's Interference**

There is considerable yet not definitive evidence that Benedicta Riepp was in agreement with Boniface Wimmer when on August 1, 1855, he wrote to Cardinal Barnabo of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, to request that the "convent of nuns in St. Marystown be acknowledged and declared formally as a convent, independent of the monastery of St. Walburg in Bavaria." One source read Benedicta's consent in a letter she sent along with Wimmer when he departed for Europe early in the same year. Writing to Karl August von Reisach, whom Wimmer planned to visit, Benedicta admitted her lack of hesitation to accept novices upon Wimmer's suggestion, and indicated the suitability of St. Marys' location for a novitiate. The satisfaction of their "German compatriots" regarding the instruction the sisters were giving their children seemed to her a sign that the order could prosper there. She even enclosed a photograph of St. Marys, hoping that "Your Excellency will not disdain it." A further piece of evidence pointing to Benedicta's early agreement with Wimmer about the idea of independence from Eichstätt is contained in a letter written several years later by Prioress Edwarda Schnitzer of St. Walburg Convent. In that letter she referred to "the written consent of Mother Benedicta in the name of all the Benedictine Sisters in America" which had accompanied Boniface Wimmer's initial request.

It appears that Benedicta's specific difficulties with Wimmer surfaced after his return from Europe, accompanied by the third and last group of women from Eichstätt. Wimmer returned triumphant with an Apostolic Brief dated August 24, 1855, 1) raising St. Vincent to the rank of exempt abbey, 2) establishing the constitution of the Bavarian Congregation as the norm for the new abbey,
3) approving St. Vincent's as the central house of a new Benedictine Congregation to be affiliated with the Italian Cassinese Congregation, and 4) appointing Wimmer the first American abbot for three years, at the end of which time an election would be held for a permanent abbot. Wimmer’s request to have St. Joseph Convent in St. Marys officially declared independent of its motherhouse in Eichstätt was not acted upon at this time. The issue of jurisdiction over the Benedictine women in America was thus doomed to remain in abeyance for four long years, resulting in the confusion, mistrust, hostility and betrayal which so significantly influenced the future direction of the female branch of Benedictinism in North America.

Some sweeping assumptions on the part of Boniface Wimmer lay at the heart of Benedicta Riepp’s growing disillusionment and seemingly precipitous behavior from the end of 1855 on. As officially declared President of the Benedictines of the Cassinese Congregation in America, Wimmer assumed the right to govern the Benedictine women as well. Because he had been instrumental in first bringing them to America, he behaved as if he alone were financially and spiritually responsible for them, noting in a letter to Mueller, King Ludwig’s court chaplain:

I provided a place for a convent for them, gave them the necessary buildings, made many long and expensive trips, spent very much money for them, brought many of the sisters to the convent, supplied confessors for them, and am also, in many respects, the head of the Order, as founder or co-founder, as advocate, as promoter of vocations for the sisters.

It is crucial to note here the ambiguous position in which Benedicta found herself at the close of 1855. The community at St. Marys had been established as a diocesan community on July 15, 1852, under the jurisdiction of Michael O’Connor, Bishop of Pittsburgh. Now, neither under the jurisdiction of Boniface Wimmer nor under Rome as a papal institute, Benedicta could rightfully assume her true superiors to be Prioress Edwarda Schnitzer, who was in turn subject to Bishop Georg von Oettl of Eichstätt, and Bishop Josue Young of Erie. When toward the end of 1855 Wimmer dared to function as if the community’s separation from Eichstätt were an actuality, Benedicta found herself torn between obedience to the European motherhouse and submission to the authority of Boniface Wimmer. Her own position of authority was also in jeopardy. The third group of sisters from Eichstätt had
been placed under the jurisdiction of Benedicta by Bishop Georg von Oettl when he exhorted that “they cease not to observe their sacred vows of religion strictly and that they fulfill especially their vow of obedience most religiously to the new superior, which they had vowed to the prioress.”

Ultimately, the jurisdiction of Boniface Wimmer by virtue of his presidency of the American component of the Italian Cassinese Congregation, would have seemed virtually inconceivable to Benedicta Riepp, given the long tradition of episcopal jurisdiction in the history of St. Walburg Convent. One historian observed that Benedicta was willing to acknowledge the changes necessitated by the circumstances of a new country, a new type of work, and the extreme poverty of their situation, but

... she would not make those changes without the consent of Mother Edwarda as long as the American convent was a dependency of St. Walburg’s. She could see as well as Abbot Boniface that a complete separation from the European house would make the problem of adaptation to this new country an easier matter, but until St. Walburg’s and the bishop of Eichstatt had declared the separation, she would not go ahead with changes.

A New Door to the West

A final factor that may have influenced Benedicta Riepp to set out for Erie with her five companions in June of 1856, was the news of the departure of Prior Demetrius di Marogna, two clerics, and two brothers from St. Vincent Monastery in Latrobe, PA, on April 5, 1856. Prior Demetrius had for some time “longed to undertake a monastic settlement,” and when Wimmer received the request from Bishop Joseph Cretin of St. Paul, MN, for members of a religious order to minister to the needs of German immigrants in Minnesota, he “placed the expedition in the hands of his prior.” It is possible that this event opened another door leading to Benedicta’s decision “to go to the West.”
Arrival in Erie

The authors of the centennial histories of St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, PA, and St. Benedict Convent, Erie, PA, believe that when Benedicta Riepp and her five companions left St. Marys on June 21, 1856, they were headed for Minnesota. The plan was to travel by wagon route to Erie, where railway accommodations to Minnesota could then be made. Benedicta’s destination in Erie at this time was East Ninth Street where Francis Joseph Hartmann was pastor of St. Mary’s Parish. She had probably never met him personally, but had learned of his location in a letter he sent to her earlier, requesting sisters to teach in his parish school. Although her intent was not to remain in Erie, she had perhaps hoped for temporary lodging there until railway connections to Minnesota could be made.

When Benedicta and her five companions arrived in Erie two days later, the pastor of St. Mary’s was not home and there was no one else designated to receive them. A common interpretation attributes this situation to the possibility that Benedicta and her sisters left St. Marys without consulting Boniface Wimmer and without giving advance notice of their need for lodging in Erie. This interpretation is based on the sole evidence of Wimmer’s words in a letter to King Ludwig three years later.

Without listening to my arguments and without first consulting at least the Rt. Rev. Bishop and the priests living there concerning the advisability of the move, or about the means of subsistence, or the acquisition of property, she left [St. Marys] with five nuns and lay sisters in the summer of 1856. No one expected her in Erie. No preparation had been made because no arrangements had previously taken place. . . . I was very displeased with this behavior of Mother Benedicta; for one reason, because without my knowledge and consent she could not take this step. . . .

Unfortunately, there is nothing in the extant letters of Benedicta Riepp that might serve to elucidate the true motivation behind the seemingly precipitous first departure from St. Marys. As suggested earlier, there was perhaps no single motive for the departure. Rather, there existed a complex of factors that ripened into action at a given moment in time, a moment then seized as the opportunity “to shake off what had come to seem like a rule of tyranny” from outside the new and developing community.

If it is true that Benedicta Riepp, Scholastica Burkhard, Ruperta Albert, Luitgarde Butsch, Frances Knapp and Anselma
Schoenhofer thought they were destined for Minnesota, then the events which transpired after their arrival in Erie on June 23 must have left them feeling thwarted and held captive. Having failed to gain lodging at St. Mary’s parish on East Ninth Street, neighbors across the street responded to their plight and offered to house them until arrangements could be completed for the remainder of their trip. Their stay at the homes of James Pfeiffer and John Smith might have been brief had Bishop Josue Young not heard of their arrival and summoned them for an interview. He reminded Benedicta of his request for sisters in July of 1854 when he visited St. Marys. He further insisted that they change their plan and establish Erie’s first Benedictine convent for the express purpose of instructing the youth of St. Mary’s parish.

This change in plan necessitated a month-long stay in the private homes of Pfeiffer and Smith while the rectory was prepared to become a convent. Benedicta stayed in Erie until the community was settled in its new home. Some time before August 25 of the same year, Benedicta returned to St. Marys, having appointed Scholastica Burkhard the first superior of St. Benedict Convent, Erie, PA.

There are no clues in the correspondence of the concerned parties about the “why” of Benedicta’s return to St. Marys. She may have deemed it advisable herself, given the radical shift in her initial plan to go to the West. On the other hand, she may have been ordered back by Boniface Wimmer or Bishop Young. Reflecting back on the situation a year later, Wimmer believed that Benedicta had acted “in the hope that all would be successful in Erie, so that the superior [Benedicta] could have her residence there and would no longer be under my authority.” In an 1859 letter to King Ludwig, he intimated that Benedicta abandoned the Erie group, stating that “she left them, then, to their fate which was severe enough.”

Initially, everything about the establishment of a community in Erie came under Wimmer’s harsh critique.

... it happened at the wrong time and it was against all regulations: they had no home of their own and no certain income; there were also two novices with them, who in this way had no novitiate; Sister Scholastica [Burkhard], who was made superior in Erie, was needed at home [St. Marys] as novice mistress and teacher of the young sisters and candidates; and finally, Sister Superior has no right to found a daughterhouse on her own.
He seemed particularly concerned about the youth and inexperience of the group who went to Erie, remarking earlier in a letter to Mueller that they "were not well enough prepared, neither for teaching nor for living the religious life."42

**Founding Women in Erie**

If as one author speculates, Benedicta Riepp, "frustrated with delays and controls, was taking the novitiate to Minnesota"43 when she and her companions left St. Marys for Erie, then the presence of Frances Knapp and Anselma Schoenhofer in the group is understandable. Both of these women had come to St. Marys from Eichstätt as candidates, and had arrived with the third contingent from Europe. Curiously, Frances had been invested shortly after her arrival in America, but Anselma had remained a candidate until the very day of the departure for Erie.44 Under what circumstances her investiture took place are not known, but that she arrived in Erie as a novice is a fact. As novices, Frances and Anselma were the newest members in the community, but in age they were the senior members of the founding group.

Ruperta Albert, and Luitgarde Butsch, had both professed their first vows at St. Marys.45 The only solemnly professed member in the group was the superior, Scholastica Burkhard.46 Having received her novitiate training at St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt under the direction of Benedicta Riepp in 1850 to 1851, Scholastica had emigrated to America with the second group from Eichstätt. Although young, Scholastica was the most experienced in the way of Benedictine life among the five-member founding group. She was well-suited for the position of first superior, having been "trained in the strict cloister of Eichstätt"47 and having had experience as the novice mistress at St. Joseph Convent in St. Marys, PA.

Scholastica Burkhard was a significant factor in Boniface Wimmer's eventual "change of heart" about the Erie foundation. He had recognized her potential from the outset, giving as one of the reasons for his initial disapproval, her indispensability to the community at St. Marys: "I foresaw that after the departure of Mother Scholastica, the conditions in St. Marys would grow worse."48 Precisely when Wimmer began to recognize a viable future for the Erie community under the able leadership of
Scholastica cannot be ascertained. Three years after its founding by Benedicta Riepp he still believed that she had "sent the first sisters there, as it were, out of spite. Therefore, I was not concerned about them until they pressingly begged me to be their father and protector also, as I am to the other sisters of our Order [St. Marys]."

It can be safely assumed that some time before November of 1857, Scholastica Burkhard appealed to Wimmer for help for her poor and struggling community. In his first extant letter to her, written from St. Louis on November 15, 1857, he is lavish in his interest and concern: "Write me soon, telling me how you are getting along, if you are well, if anything has been built, if I am able to, or must, help in any way. As soon as I can, I will visit you again. Greetings in Christ to all the sisters...."

Besides the material poverty and privation which so characterized the lives of all the pioneer Benedictine women in America, "trials stalked" the community in Erie "from its infancy." The new school year began approximately a month or so after they were settled in their small dwelling about twenty-five feet west of St. Mary's Church. More than forty students awaited the services of the five sisters whose challenge it was to attempt to teach in English. Only one of the five women, Ruperta Albert, was American-born. The others, in their early days at St. Marys, had learned English from the "American postulants who in turn learned the German tongue." Having taught the elementary grades both in Eichstätt and St. Marys, Scholastica Burkhard was undoubtedly the most experienced teacher among them. Ruperta Albert and Luitgarde Butsch assisted in the elementary grades, while Frances Knapp and Anselma Schoenhofer taught music and fine needlework. The payment received by these women was less than the minimum required to provide for their livelihood. Although the parishioners were willing to help, they themselves were too poor to offer much assistance.

Presumably, due to a weakened constitution, Luitgarde Butsch became the victim of tuberculosis only five months after her arrival in Erie. Now only seventeen years of age, she had succumbed to the rigors of pioneer life and was forced to discontinue her classes early in November of 1856. The following January, Benedicta Riepp came to Erie from St. Marys bringing Josepha Buerkle to replace Luitgarde as an English-speaking teacher. Luitgarde returned to St. Marys with Benedicta where
her strength continued to fail rapidly until her untimely death on August 30, 1857.\(^{55}\)

January of 1857 held both the prospect of death and the promise of new life for the small community in Erie. Luitgarde Butsch’s return to St. Marys was a poignant loss for the struggling community, but by the following January two candidates sought entrance into their way of life and work.\(^{56}\) The prospect of new membership necessitated the opening of a novitiate “early in 1857.”\(^{57}\)

**Additional Membership**

Meanwhile, back at St. Marys Benedicta Riepp’s plan and desire “to go to the West and that very soon” had not been abandoned. In fact, she became almost desperate to leave for Minnesota. In her only extant letter to Boniface Wimmer she wrote: “It is not possible for me to remain here since contentment and inner peace are lacking, as well as happiness. . . . I can accomplish little good under these circumstances. . . . There are eight or ten sisters here who would like to go with me. They can hardly restrain themselves.”\(^{58}\) Within a month of this letter, Benedicta set out for Minnesota a second time—this time with an even larger contingent of companions than had ventured forth a year earlier.

As was the case in June of 1856, Erie was again the logical stopping point from which Benedicta and her companions planned to finalize travel connections to Minnesota. And again, their arrival in Erie occasioned an unexpected change of plan. Prior Demetrius di Marogna in St. Cloud had received a letter from Benedicta on June 14, 1857, informing him that she would “arrive with ten sisters at the end of June or the beginning of July,” and that Boniface Wimmer had “fully agreed” to the journey.\(^{59}\) One month later, the Minnesota Prior reported to Wimmer that only part of the group had arrived and were residing in a rented house in St. Cloud—four sisters, two candidates and an orphan girl.\(^{60}\)

Exactly why only part of the group continued on from Erie to Minnesota cannot be fully ascertained from the extant correspondence. However, noting the lack of preparedness for the women in St. Cloud from di Marogna’s letter of June 15, Wimmer wrote
to Bishop Young shortly thereafter asking him to detain Benedicta and the Minnesota volunteers when they arrived in Erie. By the time Bishop Young received Wimmer’s letter, seven of the group had already left for Minnesota, while Benedicta and Augustine Short had gone to Europe.\textsuperscript{61} It is possible that Benedicta and Scholastica Burkhard had mutually agreed before she left for Europe that the second half of the group should follow later. In fact, Bishop Young added a postscript to his letter to Wimmer stating that “Sister Scholastica Burkhard told me yesterday that she was to follow those who have gone to Minnesota.”\textsuperscript{62}

Differing accounts indicate that Benedicta had left with at least eight or ten, or possibly twelve or thirteen women in all.\textsuperscript{63} Although there is no extant list of exactly who the women were who accompanied her as far as Erie in late June of 1857, the identity of the women who remained in Erie after the departure of seven for Minnesota is important in the story of Erie’s early membership. It is possible that at least three women\textsuperscript{64} were added to the number at St. Benedict Convent, Erie, from the Minnesota-bound group—possibly Alexia Lechner, Maura Flieger, and Salesia Haas. Records list the transfer of Alexia and Maura to Erie in 1857 without providing the circumstances of their transfer, and Salesia’s membership in Erie is presumed when she is transferred from there to Covington, KY in August of 1859.\textsuperscript{65} Although the presence of these three women in the group left behind can only be conjectured, it was presumably both a boon and burden to incorporate unexpected members into already poor and crowded living quarters, even if only temporarily.

At the end of August, 1857, Scholastica Burkhard and the women left behind from the Minnesota-bound group were still in Erie. At that time, the superior of the St. Cloud group in Minnesota still expected the arrival of Scholastica and at least two other sisters from Erie.

Sister Scholastica Burkhard is unfortunately not here yet; I was asked by the Reverend Father Prior [di Marogna] to write to her asking her to delay leaving Erie because she and the other two sisters were destined to go to St. Joseph\textsuperscript{66} and the Rev. Prior thought there was not yet a proper place arranged for them, and the money is lacking for renting a house.\textsuperscript{67}

A few days after Willibalda Scherbauer wrote the above to Wimmer, Prior di Marogna informed Wimmer that “things are going pretty well for the present . . . those sisters who remained
behind at Erie, especially Mother Scholastica, whom you wish for superior, may naturally come as soon as you allow it. This year there is no lack of wood and potatoes." \(^{68}\)

Scholastica Burkhard and her intended companions never left Erie. Writing to King Ludwig in 1859, Wimmer explained that at the very time they were intending to follow the first group to Minnesota, "grasshoppers for two years in succession had destroyed all field and garden crops and great need and famine prevailed" in St. Cloud.

Therefore, when I was made aware of this strange emigration by the prior of St. Marys, I wrote to the Bishop of Erie that he should not allow those sisters who were still in Erie to leave. The Rt. Rev. Bishop, at my suggestion, kept back those of the sisters who were destined for Minnesota but who were still in Erie because he, too, saw how senseless and venturesome it was. . . . If they had all gone to Minnesota, half of them would have had to go into service or would have died of hunger. \(^{69}\)

As tentative as the situation was for Scholastica Burkhard and her community in Erie during the summer of 1857, they continued to accept new candidates. If investitures and professions were a sign of prosperity, then the community in Erie most certainly prospered during the second year of its existence. Under the leadership of Scholastica Burkhard the community increased in membership from five to thirteen in the relatively short span of one year. In part, Boniface Wimmer attributed the good days in Erie to his own intervention. Writing to Oberkamp on November 23, 1857, he reported:

Sister Superior [Benedicta] had not taken care that they got property and a cloister in Erie. But since then I have done so in that I moved the bishop to give them the old church and the land which belongs to it. She had left them without a designated superior. I have given them a good prioress in the person of Sister Scholastica and have re-established confidence, harmony and trust. \(^{70}\)

The Return of Benedicta Riepp and Augustine Short from Europe

There were darker days to come before too long. The "confidence, harmony and trust" of which Wimmer spoke was apparently put to the test by the return of Benedicta and Augustine Short from
Europe early in May of 1858. Approximately six months after the above letter, Wimmer wrote to Scholastica in response to the trials that had befallen the community in Erie.

If I could get away, I would go to Erie myself in order that there will be no further disturbance and confusion in the convent. Just be firm, then nothing will be wanting. Scandals must necessarily come so that the faithful and calumined ones can prove themselves. . . . Sister Benedicta cannot do anything in the East nor in Erie. You cannot, on account of the German school, move away from the church, and two convents in one city will not be good; rather give up the place (Erie) entirely. We'll find open arms everywhere. . . . Sister Willibalda wrote recently that Sister Benedicta wants to come to her in Minnesota. That is the place where she belongs. Therefore, just trust in God and act calmly, yet firmly and resolutely.

Wimmer wrote the above letter during the time that Benedicta and Augustine were in Erie awaiting their fate, having already been rejected by the community at St. Marys. The “disturbance and confusion in the convent” to which he referred must certainly have revolved around what to do with Benedicta and Augustine. Benedicta herself reported the outcome of this tense situation to Cardinal Barnabo somewhat later.

It is too painful for me to say much about this . . . the Reverend Prelate [Wimmer] not only used every method to prevent my return to America from Europe last year, but after I had returned, he did not permit me to go to the sisters in the convent in St. Marys. . . . When I was excluded from the convent in St. Marys, I had recourse to the Right Reverend Bishop of Erie, but notwithstanding that, the Reverend Prelate commanded me to leave Erie and to go to Minnesota, which I did.

That Benedicta was in St. Cloud, MN, by the end of July, 1858, is clear from Wimmer’s letter to Abbot Utto Lang of Metten: “. . . the greatest anguish is over. The tooth is pulled out. She laid the snare for herself by deserting her position without being forced to . . . she was ordered to go immediately to St. Cloud and stay there under obedience to the prioress whom she is already starting to annoy.”

The outcome for Augustine Short, on the other hand, was to remain in Erie where she would profess her final vows on January 20, 1859. Her name appears often in Wimmer’s correspondence from mid-July of 1857 through the summer of 1858. She had been “delivered” as a candidate to St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, PA, by Boniface Wimmer himself in the fall of 1853.
Although his anger toward Benedicta included Augustine as well, he remained somewhat sympathetic toward her as a "very good child," believing that she had been naively drawn into complicity with Benedicta and would eventually "recognize her mistake." Wimmer believed that "she was flattered in every way so that she became willing 'to carry the gracious lady's [Benedicta's] train.' No time was allowed her for spiritual exercises and prayer until her good spirit was lost." 77 Just as he had threatened to exclude Benedicta from the American houses when she returned from Europe, so too had Wimmer delivered an ultimatum to Oberkamp regarding Augustine Short's future:

If Augustina wants to remain outside, we have nothing against it. If she wants to return, it should happen soon or we will not let her in anymore. Moreover, she must humble herself and both recognize and confess her guilt. 78

Augustine Short's presence in the Erie community remained precarious and fraught with confusion. It appears that Scholastica Burkhard may have consulted Wimmer about the difficulty. In his June 1, 1858, letter to her he responded to the situation of Augustine, asserting again that she had "let herself be influenced and dragged into taking part in the plans of Benedicta. Most likely she does not trust herself to write to me. Tell her to consider well the further steps she wants to take, so that she will not regret it. Nowhere is clique-forming meritorious, least of all in a convent or Order." 79

By the beginning of 1859, the crisis caused by the return of Benedicta and Augustine had passed, and the Erie community enjoyed the good favor of Abbot Boniface Wimmer. Writing to the Abbot of Scheyern on February 25, 1859, Wimmer reported:

... Now we have sisters of our Order in Erie. There are 15 of them: one [sic] of these took her final vows; four, first vows; and one received the habit. They are very good children under Mother Scholastica Burkhard who came from St. Walburg. But how poor they are! They live in a little, one-story frame house which the pastor formerly occupied. It is only 41 ft. wide and 190 ft. long, next to the church, from which, however, they are separated by a space of about 25 ft. The livelihood comes from school money, because they have a girls' school; from music lessons, and from fine needlework. Occasionally I send them a small container of lard and am also allowed to send habit goods. ... Their greatest sorrow is that they do not have an Order priest as confessor, because they do not get proper advice and help from the secular priests. I cannot help that. 80
A seemingly insignificant reference toward the end of this letter, to his late January trip from Erie to Covington, KY, proved to be not so insignificant for the sisters in Erie.

**A Daughterhouse in Covington**

In February of 1858, Bishop George A. Carrell, S.J., of Covington, KY, had appealed to Boniface Wimmer for priests. As zealous as ever to spread the Benedictine Order, Wimmer responded by sending two priests to establish a priory in the See city. A year later, after his stay in Erie, Wimmer traveled to Covington to visit the new priory, and while there resolved to secure sisters to teach the girls in the school of St. Joseph’s parish. As early as March 7, 1859, he wrote thus to Scholastica Burkhard: “By the middle of May or the beginning of June we are to have some sisters. I formally promised to get some but from where? I believe from Erie.” He went on to describe the situation in Covington, and specified the need for “one or two sisters.” Unabashedly he continued:

> How would it be if you would give up Sister Josepha, Anselma and Ruperta, and perhaps another sister? You have now too many people for Erie, and in a short time you can use the four young sisters. In St. Marys, Pennsylvania, at present, there are hardly any to be spared. . . . Josepha does not like to be in Erie; and for Anselma, a change of place would also be good—at least, I think so. As superior, Sister Josepha is by all means still too young; yet for two it is easy to be a superior . . . consider the matter, and write me an answer soon. I hope you will be proud of the fact that your convent will be a Motherhouse so soon, and after such a short time since it became independent, that it should produce such a beautiful daughter.

On May 17, 1859, Bishop Carrell wrote to Wimmer, giving his approval to the arrival of Benedictine sisters in the diocese of Covington.

> In answer to your kind favor, I beg leave to assure you of my heartfelt satisfaction at the prospect of having the good sisters in Covington. It is what I have always sincerely desired and often tried to induce the Germans to aid me to accomplish. I hope, on your approaching visit, you will succeed in obtaining the balance of the lots. If I continue to receive money from Germany, I will certainly appropriate at least the half of the amount sent, to enable you to pay the interest. . . .
Exactly how the Prioress and the sisters in Erie felt about losing some of their members to Covington so soon is not known. Nonetheless, on June 3, 1859, shortly after the school closing in Erie, Josepha Buerkle, Anselma Schoenhofer, and Ruperta Albert arrived in Covington, KY, to take up residence in a small rented house on Bush Street.\textsuperscript{84} Scholastica Burkhard had complied completely with Wimmer’s request. In fact, a closer reading of Wimmer’s March 7 letter suggests that she had had little choice. At the time there was still conflict between Wimmer and Bishop Young over the deed to the sisters’ property in Erie. Given to threats, Wimmer rambled on in his letter to Scholastica:

How is the deed coming along? Hasn’t the Rev. Bishop been to see you? Has something, or nothing, been done in the matter? If nothing happens, I’ll take you all, in the end, away to Covington. I’m not fooling either. . . . I hope the Erieites will do what is right, even if they hear they are in danger of losing sisters again. We’ll see what will happen. At present I need three or four [in Covington]; but, in case of necessity, I’ll take all. Be prudent and do not desert us in this, or I’ll desert you.\textsuperscript{85}

If Scholastica did appoint Josepha Buerkle superior of the founding group as Wimmer had suggested, then it was to be only temporary. On August 2, 1859, the Prioress of Erie sent two more sisters to Covington—Alexia Lechner and Salesia Haas. Alexia was appointed prioress, and the convent was established under the patronage of St. Walburg.

**Founding Women in Covington\textsuperscript{86}**

The appointment of Alexia Lechner as prioress was a logical choice. Now thirty-two years of age, she had been invested, trained, and professed at St. Walburg Convent, Eichstätt, and was therefore in a position to hand on the tradition as she had experienced it there. In her six short years of professed life she had emigrated to North America to the new foundation at St. Marys, had been transferred to St. Benedict Convent in Erie four years later, and now was being uprooted a third time to become the first prioress of St. Walburg Convent in Covington. Her leadership in this newly founded community was to be both influential and long-term. Traditions handed down in the community tell of her “intrepid faith and trust” in the providence of God, and attribute to
her the building of a strong community during the turbulent days of the Civil War.  

Anselma Schoenhofer had also been uprooted and re-established for the third time. She had emigrated from Eichstätt to St. Marys as a candidate in 1855, had become a member of the founding group designated for Erie on the first day of her novitiate year in 1856, and now only a year and a half after her profession became a member of another founding group. Salasia Haas, Ruperta Albert, and Josepha Buerkle completed the founding group in Covington.

Josepha’s stay in Covington was to be short-lived. She had been only fifteen years old when she became a novice at St. Marys. Four years later she was uprooted and assigned to Erie as a replacement for Luitgarde Butsch who had become ill. Apparently unhappy in Erie, she had been suggested by Boniface Wimmer to be a member of the founding group in Covington. Small wonder that her ability to persevere in Benedictine life ran out. She left the convent “to return to secular life” on August 3, 1859, two months after she had moved to Covington, and the day after the arrival of Alexia Lechner and Salesia Haas. In January of the following year, Wimmer wrote sarcastically about her in a letter to Scholastica Burkhard: “Sister Josepha had been in Pittsburgh for several days, as I hear, probably to be near her friend, the school teacher, Schneider, of Birmingham. We’ll see if a wedding will soon take place.”

An Additional Member in Erie

Not long after the departure of the founding group from Erie to Covington, St. Benedict Convent became a refuge for Emmerana Bader, the first superior of the 1857 foundation in Newark, NJ. Dissatisfied with her presence in Newark, Wimmer had replaced Emmerana as superior with a sister from St. Marys, thus rendering her stay in Newark impossible. Rather than returning to St. Marys, Emmerana arrived in Erie on July 12, 1859, and stayed for five years. It can be concluded from the correspondence of Wimmer to Scholastica Burkhard, that Emmerana’s stay in Erie was a restless one. Early in 1860, Wimmer wrote thus to the Prioress in Erie:
Tell Sister Emmerana she should not think that I’ll transfer her to St. Marys; she should rather do penance for her sins and all the harm she has brought about. She should, by means of examples of humility and obedience, try most earnestly to atone for her pride and transgressions of the Holy Rule.\textsuperscript{93}

Again in April he wrote: “Tell Sister Emmerana she should by all means persevere in Erie; that is the place where God wants her.”\textsuperscript{94}

**Scholastica Burkhard and the Decree of 1859**

During her first three and one half years as Prioress of St. Benedict Convent in Erie, Scholastica Burkhard was consistently confronted with conflicting loyalties. As the tension mounted between Boniface Wimmer and Benedicta Riepp, Wimmer often confided his disapproval of Benedicta to Scholastica. How difficult it must have been for her to shelter Benedicta when she returned from Europe, even if only for a short time, knowing that Wimmer had tried to close all doors in America to her. It must have been equally difficult to face her own sisters at times, especially to approach Ruperta Albert, Anselma Schoenhofer, and Josepha Buerkle with the news that Wimmer wanted them to uproot and begin a new foundation in Covington. And always heavy on her heart must have been the issue of dependency upon, and fidelity to the traditions of St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt.

Unfortunately, there are no extant letters or writings of Scholastica to reveal how she really experienced these tensions and ambiguities. However, there are clues in two very moving letters written to her by Prioress Edwarda Schnitzer from the convent in Eichstätt. Presumably, Scholastica had written to Prioress Edwarda about the profound changes required of them in the mission field of North America, and had shared with her the burden of her leadership in Erie.\textsuperscript{95} Prioress Edwarda responded:

> It is true, as you write, that conditions have changed much in five years. But my Sister! Love has not changed much in five years. It is always the same. I have often thought of the tears we both shed on your Profession Day at the kiss of peace without suspecting the reason. But God already knew . . . when we consider the heavy burden which God has placed on our shoulders in being superiors over others and to be a living rule for our subjects, then we are especially in need of humility and submission for the good of our monastic community.\textsuperscript{96}
She continued at length, reflecting on the need for humility, obedience and self-denial. She referred to the "sorrowful" visit of Benedicta and Augustine Short in Eichstatt, reassuring Scholastica of her own efforts to persuade Benedicta: "Just like you, I begged Mother Benedicta to beg pardon in humility of the Very Reverend Lord Abbot and fulfill her duty of obedience." In closing, she exhorted Scholastica to hold herself, "as to a wall, to the holy rule and the statutes." She assured her again "that in love we are not separated. If I am able to do anything for you, write me freely and it will be done very willingly. . . . I thank you for your frank information." 97

The second letter of Prioress Edwarda implies that Scholastica may have written to her to beg pardon for the ever-widening gulf between the American sisters and the motherhouse in Bavaria. By the time she replied to Scholastica on November 15, 1859, Prioress Edwarda had already received, through the Bishop of Eichstatt, the Papal decree separating the American Benedictine convents from the motherhouse in Eichstatt and placing them under American episcopal jurisdiction. 98 She empathized with Scholastica:

It causes me deep sadness, as you say in your letter, and since I understand your heart I can imagine it, that the mothers and sisters who went to America from St. Walburg no longer want to be called my children. I want to write to you very candidly about this and I hope and desire to calm you completely. 99

After describing her receipt of the decree, Prioress Edwarda went on to console Scholastica.

Now, Mother Scholastica, you will be at peace and will not look upon it as though I, on my own impulse, had deserted my children. . . . Good Mother Scholastica! even if I can no longer call you my child, I do with real affection call you my sister; for we have one father, St. Benedict, and one mother, St. Scholastica. Moreover, there is nothing at all for which I should forgive you. What happened, I believe, did not happen with your consent. Whoever brought it about is forgiven sincerely. 100

It appears that Scholastica Burkhard may have taken on more than her share of responsibility for the situation of Benedictine women in America after the Decree of 1859, and for the apparent defeat of Boniface Wimmer in his request to rule the American Benedictine women by virtue of his role as president of the Cassinese Congregation in America. The clue to Scholastica's
self-blame comes in the letter written to her by Wimmer on January 23, 1860, a little over a month after his receipt of the Decree.

I also heard that you hardly trust yourself to write to me. Why? Even if I was mad at you, and still am, on account of the thoughtless things which caused me so much displeasure and so many heartaches, yet, I know well enough that you cannot help it; and, I was not mad at you nor at the sisters in general, but only the weeds among them. I know well enough that you are doing your best to retain the introduction and preservation of a good spirit in the convent. I'm very sorry to perceive that you grieve so over these sad happenings...¹⁰¹

That Scholastica remained unsure about Eichstatt's attitude toward her and all the sisters in America is evident in a particularly poignant response made to her by Prioress Edwarda Schnitzer ten years later:

... as to your worry that I have excluded you from my heart, let me tell you, dear Mother Scholastica, that I love and respect you with all my heart. You have not offended me, and therefore, I have nothing to forgive. It pleases me that all is going well with you and your co-sisters who went to America from St. Walburg. ... I am praying for you that the Lord will... finally unite us and gather us all around St. Benedict in heaven.¹⁰²

Community Profile at the Close of 1859

With the Roman Decree of 1859, the ancient tradition of autonomous Benedictine houses of women was activated in the New World and introduced into the American experience of Benedictine women for generations to come. Essentially, the Decree gave approval to convents in St. Marys, Erie, and Newark, which were to function independently of each other and separate from the founding convent in Eichstatt. Subject to the jurisdiction of the bishop in whose diocese each house was located, the Prioress and her community theoretically retained the cenobitic privilege of directing the internal affairs of each respective house.

For St. Benedict Convent in Erie, the Decree marked a two-fold independence—from St. Walburg Convent in Eichstatt, its "grandmotherhouse," and from St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, its "motherhouse." At the time of this officially declared independence, the community numbered eleven women.¹⁰³ It had already
established a branch house in Covington, KY, to which five of the sixteen women who had come to Erie between June 23, 1856, and the end of 1859, had been sent.\textsuperscript{104}

The community consisted of four women who were perpetually professed, five who had professed their simple vows, and two novices. The average age of the members was twenty-six. Maura Flieger, thirty-seven, was the oldest, and Edith Schlaudecker, nineteen, was the youngest. Four of the women—Scholastica Burkhard, Maura Flieger, Emmerana Bader, and Frances Knapp—had emigrated from St. Walburg Convent, Eichstätt, and had therefore received all or part of their training in Benedictine life there. Two members of the new independent community—Maura Flieger and Augustine Short—had transferred to Erie from St. Marys, and Emmerana Bader had come to Erie from Newark. Only two of the original five foundresses were still in Erie—Scholastica Burkhard and Frances Knapp.

Of the eleven women in Erie at the close of 1859, only one—Augustine Short—was American-born. Of the ten European-born members, five were from Bavaria, one from Württemburg, three from Baden, and one from France. Surprisingly, all those who had entered St. Benedict Convent as candidates were European-born. The new community had not yet attracted any American-born candidates.

“Bitter Beginnings:” Newark, NJ\textsuperscript{105}

The story of the founding of St. Scholastica Convent in Newark, New Jersey, runs parallel in time with the events of the last two years of Erie’s story as narrated above, and necessitates a preliminary return to the situation at St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, PA, after the group left for Erie in June of 1856. Having been thwarted in her plan to go to Minnesota via Erie with five traveling companions, Benedicta Riepp returned to St. Marys alone, some time between late July and August 25 of 1856. Undoubtedly weary and frustrated by what had happened in Erie, she must have encountered a community of sinking morale at St. Joseph Convent upon her return. The community had lost nine members in less than
three years. Two had not persevered in the community (Hildegarde Renner and Kiliana [Eger]), two had succumbed to untimely deaths (Willibalda Koegel, June 29, 1855, and Cunigunda Lebus, May 22, 1856), and now five others had remained in Erie to establish the first daughterhouse of Benedictine women in America.

Even more demoralizing than membership loss must have been the confusion, mistrust, hostility and betrayal which persisted between Boniface Wimmer and the pioneer women at St. Marys, and which now posed an even greater threat to the internal harmony of the community itself.

**A Theory About Internal Strife**

At the beginning of this chapter, it was proposed that four main factors influenced Benedicta in her somewhat precipitous departure “to go West” with five other companions, on June 21, 1856. These factors seemed largely external to the innerworkings of the community. In examining the circumstances that led to the departure of a second group, bound for Indiana, Pennsylvania, on March 28, 1857, it appears that a serious division within the community at St. Marys precipitated the intervention of Boniface Wimmer, and the eventual departure of six women at his behest.

Surprisingly, there are only three extant letters in the body of relevant correspondence from the year 1856, two of which were written by Benedicta Riepp. The first of these, written on February 14, was addressed to the Director of the Ludwig-Missionsverein and contained profuse expressions of gratitude for the donation of 1000 florin to her convent. Besides reporting that “among all the missions in America there really is no poorer institute than ours,” Benedicta makes no references to the other issues gathering momentum at the time. Given Boniface Wimmer’s propensity for frequent letter writing, it is curious that there is only one of his 1856 letters in the body of correspondence related to the founding of Benedictine women in America. Besides the possibility of such letters not having been preserved, there are a couple of other possible explanations. Perhaps his energy and attention had been diverted away from the women at St. Marys, and toward the project of founding St. Vincent Monastery’s first
branch house in St. Cloud, MN, in April of 1856. Or perhaps he just backed off, due to Rome’s refusal to act on his request that St. Joseph Convent at St. Marys be officially separated from the Eichstätt motherhouse.

Whatever the reasons for the seeming silence about the issues of 1856 in the relevant correspondence of the time, there are two extant retrospective accounts, biased though they may be, that supply clues about what may have been happening at St. Marys from about April of 1856 to June of 1857. The first account is a letter written by Boniface Wimmer to Mueller, the Court Chaplain to King Ludwig I of Bavaria. In it he speaks about the sisters’ discontent with the new Prior and confessor he had appointed for St. Marys to replace Benedict Haindl.

To replace him, I sent Fr. Rupert Seidenbusch, a good younger priest far superior to Fr. Benedict in ability and learning but who had already had some disagreement with the superior which he settled independently. I did this not out of malice, but because circumstances demanded it and I was able to depend completely on Fr. Rupert. But that was a bad choice: good things and bad things were tried. Entreaties, letters, etc. came to keep Fr. Benedict, and not to have Fr. Rupert, all to no purpose! . . . However, for a long time Fr. Benedict was pursued with letters which contained secrets of confession about the Superior and Willibalda until I put an end to it.107

According to Wimmer, there was internal strife and growing division among the women at St. Marys over differing loyalties to Benedict Haindl and Rupert Seidenbusch. As Wimmer interpreted the situation, he concluded that Benedicta and Willibalda Scherbauer were on the side of Benedict Haindl and therefore “contemptuous” toward Rupert Seidenbusch and himself. As for the other side, he reported that “any of the nuns or sisters who allowed themselves to show confidence or attachment to the Abbot or Prior, fell out of favor” with Benedicta and Willibalda. These others, he claimed, were all satisfied with Seidenbusch and “became indignant when contemptuous conversation was carried on about him and me.”108

Even more crucial to an understanding of the situation among the women themselves, is Wimmer’s reference to a seemingly unhealthy and divisive alliance between Benedicta Riepp and Willibalda Scherbauer. Wimmer’s intimations could be easily passed over, were it not for similar references to the relationship between Benedicta and Willibalda in a second source, far
removed in time from Wimmer's letter—the memoirs of Nepomucene Ludwig, an eyewitness of the conditions at St. Marys in its earliest years. Both authors point to Willibalda becoming the "boss in the house," and to the growing resentment on the part of the other members of the community toward her, and toward Benedicta for allowing the diminishment of her own authority. Wimmer reported to Mueller that Willibalda Scherbauer had been appointed novice mistress at St. Marys after Scholastica Burkhard had gone to Erie,

... and was very soon the boss in the house; whatever she wanted came to pass; without her permission no one could speak to the Superior. Nothing was done for the novices any more; the instructions were omitted; even music was neglected though she [Willibalda] was well qualified to teach; the Superior and novice mistress bantered with each other like children, took their meals together, and neglected the spiritual exercises more and more until finally—from March to the end of May—prayers in choir, and all order of the day stopped.

During this troubled time, Wimmer had designated himself the extraordinary confessor at the convent, and claimed to have learned some of the "secrets of confession" which had earlier been confided to Benedict Haindl. He learned how the other sisters

... deplored the fact that there was no order, especially when (without necessity) the Superior took in a one-year-old girl who screamed day and night and disturbed the sleep, spiritual reading, and the choir. She was given one sister to care for her. The two nuns fondled the child, carried her around the house and even took her to choir. ... The Superior and Willibalda sometimes did not pray the breviary at all, found no time even for praying the rosary and appointed another sister to do this!!

Nepomucene Ludwig remembered a sense of foreboding that fell upon the community at St. Marys after the last contingent of sisters arrived from Eichstatt in December of 1855. The "number of sisters increased considerably ... dangers too, threatened the peaceful existence of the community. ... The younger set of sisters among us felt there was trouble ahead, that outside forces threatened, and we were afraid of what the future had in store. ... We were so many newcomers, inexperienced."

Writing fifty-six years after the events described, Nepomucene Ludwig's identification of Willibalda Scherbauer as the troublemaker at St. Marys during the later months of 1856 and the
first half of 1857, corroborates Wimmer’s own version written in July of 1857. Not daring to mention her name, Ludwig wrote:

One of the newly arrived sisters from Saint Walburga’s—her name might better be left unknown—was dissatisfied with conditions as she found them here. She was the darling daughter of a German official, a clever musician, but she could not adapt herself to the plain, exacting demands of convent life, as it was then lived in St. Marys. Her first appearance here had left a rather poor impression, and we all resolved at recreation time that we should be on our guard. She had a flattering way of ingratiating herself with the Mother Superior, and it was soon evident that the Superior, instead of showing leadership was herself being led. There had been criticism of this and of that, and changes were urged of several things in the order of the day.\(^{113}\)

Concerning the apparent division in the house over loyalties to the assigned confessors, Ludwig believed that Benedicta Riepp had been “prodded into opposition” against Wimmer and the Prior by Willibalda. It was Willibalda whom she blamed for St. Vincent Monastery’s withdrawal of the regular supply of flour from the convent, and the reduction of the already small portion of bread per person to “five small slices.” Referring to Willibalda as “the manager,” Ludwig attributed to her the responsibility for other unfortunate happenings in the house.

How many tears were shed when we had to remain in bed even during the time of the holy sacrifice of the Mass. We would then rise, dress and go to breakfast. And how about saying of the Divine Office? How was this function performed? In the refectory after breakfast, we knelt, four or five in groups around one of the sisters who knew some Latin, to recite the Divine Office in low murmurs. Who would ever imagine that one woman would dare to bring about such changes, but these are facts. Those were days of trial and of deep anguish for us all. . . . One time we were penalized with what was called ‘monitiones’—yes, all of us were punished with a sort of enforced confinement or arrest. We were held in confinement in the refectory because we had not shown the proper respect for the older members of the community, although we did not recall our being guilty of any such conduct.\(^{114}\)

As she recalled these “little things” which she believed were “a sort of preparation for things to happen in the future,” Ludwig claimed at this point in her remembering that “there was no sign of opposition” on the part of the women who were being “managed” by Willibalda and Benedicta. Yet less than a page later, Ludwig asserts that Willibalda’s manner of action had paved the
way for "dissatisfaction on the part of some of the sisters. They were no longer submissive. They wanted to rule, and so, meeting in secret, they decided to demand of Abbot Boniface Wimmer that they be sent to a mission foundation. Most of us were unaware of the entire scheme."  

So it seems that strife and division within the community did, as was suggested earlier, precipitate the dramatic intervention of Boniface Wimmer on solemn profession day, March 21, 1857. Wimmer recalled in his letter to Mueller that Emmerana Bader, some time before, had written to the Prior, Rupert Seidenbusch, about the disorder in the convent at St. Marys. He had come to the convent to assist a dying sister, at which time Emmerana gave him her letter of complaint. According to Wimmer, the Prior lost the letter and "the Superior got it; so now Emmerana could not bear it any longer."

**Solemn Profession of Vows (March 21, 1857)**

The event of the first and last profession of solemn vows by Benedictine women in America belongs integrally to the story of St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, PA. Just as importantly, it marks the beginning of the founding story of St. Scholastica Convent in Newark, NJ.

By 1857, at least fifteen women had professed their first vows at St. Marys. According to the 1846 statutes in effect at the Eichstätt motherhouse, eleven of the women at St. Marys would have been eligible for their final and solemn profession three years after their first vows. It appears that Boniface Wimmer anticipated in March what would have been a December solemn profession date. In a letter to Mueller, Wimmer admitted that he called for the solemn profession of the young sisters as a method of forming "a conventual chapter, and in this way to bring the Superior to insist on the better observance of order, the distribution of duties, etc." In a letter to Oberkamp, he implied that the only official voting members of the community at that time were Benedicta Riepp, Walburga Dietrich, Willibalda Scherbauer, Emmerana Bader and Scholastica Burkhard. Somewhat exasperated by the fact he added:
The last one [Scholastica Burkhard] was in Erie; Emmerana was persecuted and suppressed; Willibalda is a clever rascal, or as Confessor Schmid of Eichstätt said, a right crafty student. Walburga is strangely and entirely set to one side by these two. Consequently, the whole convent consists of the Superior and Willibalda.121

According to Wimmer’s recollection, the celebration of profession was to be on February 10, the feast of St. Scholastica. But “when I arrived, nothing was prepared. I had to return on July 11, the feast of St. Benedict. How surprised I was that only five sisters were permitted to pronounce vows, and the more capable ones, namely, the English speaking sisters, were not allowed to make vows (at this time)!"122 Writing later to Oberkamp, Wimmer concluded that his attempt to form a conventual chapter had failed “in that only five of the current 15 were permitted to make profession, and these five were, with one single exception, weak-willed creatures who had no power to remove the disorders.”123

There are several discrepancies between these accounts by Wimmer and what has been recorded in the annals of St. Joseph Convent regarding the date of the solemn profession, the number of women professing, and exactly who was responsible for assessing their readiness. Rather than July 11, the feast of the Solemnity of Benedict, the date recorded at St. Marys was March 21, the feast commemorating the death of Benedict. Nine women professed solemn vows, contrary to Wimmer’s report of five. He indicated that only five were “permitted” to profess vows, implying that these women had gone through the process of acceptance required by the statutes, ultimately having received the affirmative vote of the entire community. That Wimmer did not like the community’s choices is clear. He went on in his letter to Mueller: “Those who were accepted (for solemn vows) with the exception of Sister Nepomucene [Ludwig], concerning whom the Superior was mistaken, were all timid (women). Two very sickly young women, who would not trust themselves to say a word, were accepted.”124

Why nine women, instead of five, professed solemn vows on March 21, 1857, cannot be ascertained from the extant sources. It is not clear who actually had the final authority in the selection process—Benedicta Riepp and the community or Boniface Wimmer himself.125 Even less clear is the basis upon which Nepomucene Ludwig, Xavier Lechner, Placida Graber, Evangelista Kremmeter, Theresa Vogel, Stanislaus Kostka Beyerle, Edwarda Redant, Romana Bernhard and Gregoria Moser were chosen.126
Precise details about this first ceremony of solemn profession are lacking. One source indicates that "the ceremony was conducted in the parish church with all the solemnity possible."\textsuperscript{127} Nepomucene Ludwig recalled:

These vows were pronounced in the presence of Right Reverend Boniface Wimmer, who was authorized for this occasion, as our founder and spiritual father, by Bishop Joshua Young, the Bishop of Erie. . . . The religious service lasted three hours. After this sublime act, one felt that the soul was released from the body and would go straight to the throne of God.\textsuperscript{128}

The vow documents of five of the nine women who professed solemn vows have been preserved. The documents of Nepomucene Ludwig and Theresa Vogel were handwritten in Latin, and those of Xavier Lechner and Stanilaus Kostka Beyerle, in German. Placida Graber's was written in English and read as follows:

\begin{verbatim}
In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. I, Sister Mary A. Placida Graber, of Carrolltown, Cambria County of the diocese of Pittsburgh, to the honor of Almighty God, of the ever Blessed Virgin Mary, and of our holy Father Benedict, and of the Saints, by these solemn vows promise stability, and the conversion of my morals, and obedience, according to the Rule of the same holy Father St. Benedict, and our Constitution, in the presence of God, and of his Saints, whose relics are here present, and of the Right Reverend Lord and Father in God, Boniface Wimmer, worthy Abbot of St. Vincent's, and of the venerable Benedicta Riepp, Superior of this Convent and the Sisters here present. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. In witness thereof, I have signed this with my own hand, at this venerable place, St. Marys, in the year after the Incarnation of our Lord, eighteen hundred and fifty seven, on the feast of St. Benedict, 21 of March.\textsuperscript{129}
\end{verbatim}

Significant as this ceremony of solemn profession was in itself, it was of further historic significance in the founding story of St. Scholastica Convent in Newark, NJ. Nepomucene Ludwig remembered that "the cross, a very heavy one was to be placed on our shoulders on the very day of our profession. . . . It all came on us like the suddenness of a clap of thunder to rock the peace of our day. On this day we were given the deplorable information at table that [some of our] Sisters were to leave without the blessing and against the will of venerable Mother Benedicta Riepp."\textsuperscript{130}
Departure to Indiana, Pennsylvania

Boniface Wimmer and the Prior at St. Marys, Rupert Seidenbusch, had heard of the unrest within the women’s community as early as December of 1856. Apparently, Walburga Dietrich and Emmerana Bader had clearly informed Wimmer “that they would not and could not remain [at St. Marys] any longer, and they asked that I transfer them, for God’s sake, to another place.” Exactly when this request for transfer was made, and if the dissatisfaction with the situation at St. Marys included others besides Walburga and Emmerana, is not discernible. Both Wimmer, in his July 24 letter to Mueller, and Nepomucene Ludwig in her memoirs, imply that their “scheme” was underway some time before Wimmer actually arrived for the solemn profession in March.

Wimmer and Ludwig both wrote about the events which transpired after the ceremony of solemn profession on March 21, 1857.

I informed the superior, after the profession of vows was over, that I was choosing Sister Emmerana and four or five other nuns and sisters to send them, in time, to the West [Minnesota]. For the present, and since I had just then had a carriage there, I would take them to Indiana [PA] immediately, where we have a roomy house and a beautiful garden, and where Fr. Ulrich Spöffl, a very good and wise man, would prepare them for the mission. . . . Besides Emmerana, I suggested Philomena [Spiegel], who likewise did not want to stay any longer and four others who had not been allowed to make solemn vows; but I took good care that the St. Marys teaching staff remained strong enough. As reasonable as my desire was in every respect (it cost her nothing), so unreasonable she became about it, and rejected it flatly and firmly, especially regarding Emmerana.132

In the face of Benedicta Riepp’s resistance, Wimmer called a meeting of the whole community which was to take place at 2:40 p.m. in the refectory.

I myself attended with Fr. Prior and presented the case dispassionately, and left it to their judgment, with the statement that I wished to hear the result after dinner, and if they absolutely did not want to take into consideration my advice and wish, then I would not bother myself with them anymore. Naturally, I received a “Yes,” a unanimous one, from the Chapter.133

There is a good deal of confusion in the sources regarding how many women actually left for Indiana, PA, with Boniface Wimmer and the Prior, some time during the week following
solemn profession. Wimmer reported that after the chapter meeting many sisters volunteered to go and from them “I took two at once, and later three more.” In the very next sentence, however, he stated that “Fr. Prior and I and the four sisters arrived safely in the town of Indiana on the 26th of March.”134 The designation of “four sisters” in this account matches his reference to the event in a letter to Oberkamp.

Only once did I take nuns and sisters from St. Marys, as I mentioned earlier in a letter: namely, Sister Emmerana, who originally came from St. Walburg, because she could no longer bear the tyranny; the simple professed Sisters Benedicta Burkhard and Adelgund Leschak [sic]; and the lay sister Philomena from St. Walburg. That happened, indeed, with the defiant opposition of Sister Superior at first, but afterwards with the unanimous approval of her and the community.135

Nepomucene Ludwig, on the other hand, names six women who left St. Marys for Indiana, PA, on March 28, 1857—Emmerana Bader, Benedicta Burkhard, Alphonsa Hussey, Adelgunda Leschall, Philomena Spiegel, and Meinrada Massenhauser.136 Her account contains a rather clear reference to the fate of the Indiana, PA, venture. She recalled that the sisters were expected to establish a new convent there and “were to take charge of a school.” However, “the projected foundation was unsuccessful,” and “they left the later part of May, 1857.”137 Wimmer makes no reference in any of his letters to the return of the Indiana sisters to St. Marys. He merely stated that “in Indiana they taught in the girls’ school until soon after the question of Newark came up unexpectedly. The Bishop [James Bayley] and the parish asked me for sisters; I decided to send the sisters from Indiana to Newark and to send others to the West from St. Marys.”138

It is curious that the Wimmer sources make no reference to the failure of the Indiana, PA, venture to prepare sisters for a future Minnesota mission. Rather, Wimmer’s references lead the reader to believe that the Indiana house was abandoned when the need for sisters in Newark presented itself.139 Nepomucene Ludwig, on the other hand, leaves open the possibility of concluding that the Indiana, PA, foundation was a failure in itself, and separate from the founding in Newark some months later.140 A recent historian of the Newark/Ridgely community attributes the abandonment of the Indiana venture to the news received by Wimmer that financial conditions in St. Cloud, MN, were too poor to receive the group he was preparing to send West.141
Whatever the real reason may have been for the departure from Indiana, PA, it is fairly certain that at least four or perhaps six women left there toward the end of May and returned to St. Marys. It is also reasonably clear that these same women became part of the founding group in Newark, NJ, on July 2, 1857.

**Arrival in Newark**

The presence of a Benedictine priest in Newark predated Boniface Wimmer’s 1846 arrival in America. A Benedictine missionary from Salzburg, Nicholas Balleis, arrived in Newark in 1838, and built the church of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception. Nearly ten years later he learned of Wimmers’s desire to establish monasteries in the East, and offered in 1847 to turn St. Mary’s German parish in Newark over to Wimmer. Reluctant to assume ownership of the Newark property, Wimmer consented to assist the pastor of St. Mary’s parish by sending a priest from St. Vincent’s, Latrobe, PA, to Newark in 1847.

Seven years later Bishop Bayley again petitioned Wimmer to take over the parish, but he refused responsibility for it until a final desperate plea came from the Bishop in the spring of 1857. In April of that year Wimmer sent Valentine Felder to Newark as the new pastor of St. Mary’s, and by mid-May the monks had purchased three houses adjacent to the parish property, one of which was “being made ready for the Benedictine sisters who were expected in Newark in about a month.”

Perhaps it was the convergence of circumstances that led to the arrival of seven Benedictine women in Newark, on July 2, 1857. The acquisition of St. Mary’s parish in Newark by the monks from St. Vincent’s in April of 1857, a request from Bishop Bayley to Wimmer on May 12 to have a “sisterhood of the Benedictine Order established here as soon as possible for the education of girls,” the failure of the Indiana, PA, venture in late May, the news from Prior Demetrius in mid-June about the poor financial situation in St. Cloud, and the abiding restlessness and strife within the community of women at St. Marys, may have together provided the impetus for the leave-taking of six sisters and one candidate from St. Marys, PA, to Newark. Both the German and English Registers preserved in the archives of the Newark
community report that Benedicta Riepp herself sent the sisters to Newark. The German register reads:

At the urgent request of the Rev. Rupert Seidenbusch, O.S.B., to the Sisters of St. Marys, Elk County, Pennsylvania, to take over the girls' and little boys' school in Newark, N.J., Mother Benedicta Riepp, prioress, sent the following Sisters who arrived in Newark on July 2, 1857:

1. Sr. M. Emmerana Bader
2. Sr. M. Benedicta Burkhard
3. Sr. M. Adelgunda Leschall
4. Sr. M. Alphonsa Hussey
5. Sr. M. Philomena Spiegel
6. Sr. M. Meinrada Massenhauser
7. Miss Anne McBride

Newark/Ridgely's historian concludes that the notation regarding Benedicta's having "sent" the sisters to Newark was an "obvious euphemism," since both accounts by Nepomucene Ludwig and Boniface Wimmer indicate Benedicta's disapproval of the departure. In at least two letters, Wimmer himself states that he "took sisters to Newark," with "the defiant opposition of Sister Superior at first."

Ironically, it was Rupert Seidenbusch, who "introduced Benedictine sisters from St. Marys, Pennsylvania, to the parochial school attached to the parish" in Newark. He had been reassigned from St. Marys, to Newark on June 11, 1857, after the pastor of St. Mary's parish had been killed by a trolley car in New York City on May 28. Whether for good or for ill, it appears that Rupert Seidenbusch was to be the second most influential man in the establishment and spread of Benedictine women in the United States during the second half of the nineteenth century.

**Founding Women in Newark**

Two of the women who founded St. Scholastica Convent in a small frame building on Shipman Street had entered and professed their vows at St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt. The superior of the group, Emmerana Bader, had earlier been appointed superior of the Indiana, PA, group by Boniface Wimmer. That he had also designated her "prioress" of the new foundation in Newark is clear from his letter to Oberkamp dated September 18,
The Reshaping of a Tradition

1857. Now twenty-seven years old, and having been "persecuted and suppressed" by Benedicta and Willibalda at St. Marys, Wimmer deemed Emmerana a "suitable" prioress for St. Scholastica Convent in Newark. His satisfaction, however, was short-lived.

Approximately a year later, Wimmer traveled to St. Marys in search of someone more suited for leadership in the struggling community. The reasons for Wimmer's apparent disenchantment with Emmerana Bader are only intimated in Nepomucene Ludwig's memoirs and his own correspondence. About Wimmer's unexpected visit to St. Marys in 1858, Ludwig remembered:

He insisted on obtaining one of our sisters for the mission in Newark, New Jersey. Things were not moving along well there. He must have someone and he selected the one capable teacher that was left to us.... Wimmer was deaf to the pleas of the sisters and Sister Nepomucene was off to Newark, New Jersey, where there was dissatisfaction, disorder and want of peace. ... The prospects at Newark, New Jersey, were not very reassuring.... Order and discipline were soon restored after two sisters, namely the superior Mother Emmerana Bader and Sister Adelgunda Lejeal [Leschall] left the place voluntarily. Debts were left behind, also poverty and great need....

Records in the archives of the Erie community report that Emmerana Bader arrived there on July 12, 1859, and stayed five years. It is difficult to know exactly what happened to her from the time Nepomucene Ludwig arrived in Newark in 1858, until Emmerana "voluntarily" left in 1859. Ludwig's own memoirs and archival records at St. Marys indicate that Nepomucene Ludwig was the "acting superior" in Newark from 1858 to 1862. Therefore, it seems that Wimmer had not deposed Emmerana from her position as prioress. That she remained prioress is further verified by the fact that her name appears on vow documents as late as January 6, 1859. Nevertheless, her two years as the first prioress of the Newark community must have been turbulent ones. Poverty stalked this new community, just as it had been the constant companion of the earlier foundations at St. Marys and Erie. In fact, the final impasse between Wimmer and Emmerana Bader may well have occurred due to financial misunderstandings. In November of 1857, King Ludwig's Court Chaplain informed Wimmer that the King had allocated 3000 florin for the Benedictine men and women in Newark, and that he should "divide honestly with the
The sisters never received their share. Wimmer defended his decision to withhold it from them in a letter to King Ludwig almost two years later.

I have bought three houses near the church for $8000 or 20,000 fl. which I had to have to protect the church against fire and for living places for my brothers and sisters and enough space for a future monastery. One of these three houses I gave to the sisters, who gave me not a farthing for it. It cost me $2500 or 6120 fl. Was it then an injustice when I took 1500 fl., the part that belonged to the sisters, from the 3000 fl. which your Majesty gave as a payment to me and to consider it as a repayment for the 6120 fl. or $2500? They still owe me 4620 fl. which I probably will never receive. Yes, I suspect I will have to spend much more very soon because the house has to be rebuilt and changed into a convent. . . . It is only just that the sisters, if they can, pay their own debts. I did not deprive them of anything.

Exactly how the penniless sisters were to repay such a debt seemed never to have entered Wimmer’s mind. Nor had it occurred to him that they should have been consulted on financial matters that directly affected them.

By January 23 of 1860, Boniface Wimmer credited himself with the improved situation at Newark, and still claimed a great deal of power over the fate of Emmerana Bader. To Scholastica Burkhard in Erie he wrote:

From Philadelphia I went to N.Ark where I have not been for eight months. Thanks be to God, I found everything in good shape, especially with the sisters. A few sharp letters had worked and now there is no complaint whatever, neither about the house nor the school, nor between brothers and sisters. I cannot thank God enough for this. I became, for a time, very much annoyed on account of a bad spirit among several of the sisters; yet it was a temptation; and I hope the devil has been driven out, for some time at least. I fully intended to dismiss immediately those who would speak of running away. . . . Tell Sister Emmerana she should not think I’ll transfer her to St. Marys; she should rather do penance for her sins and all the harm she has brought about. She should, by means of examples of humility and obedience, try most earnestly to atone for her pride and transgressions of the Holy Rule.

Again, on April 25, 1860, Wimmer exhorted Scholastica Burkhard to “tell Sister Emmerana she should by all means persevere in Erie; that is the place where God wants her.”

Philomena Spiegel’s role in the community in Newark during its first two years was low-profile compared to the influential role she was to play in the community after August of 1865, when she
became the community’s first elected prioress—a position she held until 1884. It is not known whether she volunteered to go to Indiana, PA, and then later to Newark, or whether Wimmer simply named her as the appropriate lay sister to accompany the group. About her presence in the original group to Indiana, PA, Wimmer noted that he had “suggested Philomena, who likewise did not want to stay any longer [at St. Marys].”

In the same letter to Mueller, Wimmer reported that he had suggested “four others who had not been allowed to make solemn vows” to accompany Emmerana and Philomena to Indiana, PA. Of these four, Benedicta Burkhard and Adelgunda Leschall had been members of the earliest investiture group at St. Marys in 1853.

Only three months after her arrival in Newark, Benedicta Burkhard professed her final vows in a somewhat abbreviated Latin formula:

I, Sister Maria Anna Benedicta, promise before God and his saints, stability and conversion of my morals, obedience, poverty and chastity, according to the Rule of St. Benedict and the statutes of this monastery constructed in honor of St. Mary ever Virgin, in the presence of the Venerable Mother Maria Anna Emmerana Bader, Prioress, on the 17th day of October, on the feast of St. Hedwig, A.D. 1857.

Although there are gaps and discrepancies in Adelgunda Leschall’s story, it is clear from the German Register that she and Alphonsa Hussey also professed their final vows on October 17, 1857, in Newark. Adelgunda’s vocation was definitely put to the test during the first two years of the Newark foundation. Archival records at St. Marys show that she was among the original group that went to Indiana, PA, then returned to St. Marys in May after the failure of that venture, and was uprooted again to join the group bound for Newark on July 2. Nepomucene Ludwig, who became the acting superior in Newark from 1858 to 1862, implies in her memoirs that Adelgunda Leschall, along with Emmerana Bader, was at least in part responsible for the lack of order and discipline in the community scarcely a year after their arrival. She further states that both of these women left Newark “voluntarily.” It is probable that Adelgunda accompanied Emmerana Bader to Erie in July of 1859, for it was from there that she left convent life before the close of that year. She had deteriorated in health as well as in morale, and it is clear from Boniface
Wimmer's letter to her, written on July 25, 1859, that she had requested a dispensation from her vows. However, she appears to have left the convent before her request for dispensation was finalized. Twice in her memoirs, Nepomucene Ludwig alludes to Adelgunda's departure, writing that she "gave up the habit of the Order and returned to secular life." In another place she reported that "Sister Adelgunda Leschall later on left the convent (August, 1859) and married." The German Register of the Newark community simply stated that she "stepped out in 1859." The last reference to Adelgunda in the relevant correspondence occurs in a letter written to Scholastica Burkhard by Boniface Wimmer on January 23, 1860.

Sr. Adelgunda is in Newark in a private home. She goes to the theater and to dances, where she has astonished the people not a little in that she could cover all deception; yet, she went to confession to me before I left Newark.

Alphonsa Hussey bore two unique and distinguishing characteristics among the seven women in the founding group at Newark. She was the only woman of Irish descent to have entered at St. Marys, PA, between 1853 and 1855, and at the time of Newark's founding she was the oldest in the group at age forty-three.

Curiously, Meinrada Massenhauser had remained a novice for nearly four years. Both of her vow documents are extant and January 6, 1859, is historically verifiable as the date of her first profession. In her native German tongue, Meinrada professed her vows as follows:

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. I, Sister Meinrada Massenhauser, of the diocese of Regensburg, promise to Almighty God, the Blessed Virgin Mary, our holy Father Benedict and all the saints, poverty, chastity and obedience according to the Rule of the same holy Father Benedict and our statutes, in the presence of the Reverend Prior of Newark, Father Rupert, and in the presence of the Reverend Mother Prioress Emmerana, and all the sisters present in our venerable house in Newark. In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. In witness whereof I have written this formula with my own hand on January 6 in the year of the Lord, 1859.

Meinrada's document of first profession reflects an aspect of the controversy occurring among church hierarchy regarding the nature of the vows American women religious would be allowed to take. Her profession of "poverty, chastity and obedience," rather
than the customary Benedictine vows of stability, conversion of morals, and obedience, foreshadowed the 1864 Roman decision that all sisters in America would be required to take simple vows rather than solemn vows. It is interesting to note, however, that when she pronounced her final vows on August 7, 1862, she professed stability, conversion, and obedience rather than poverty and chastity.¹⁶⁸

Anna McBride was a candidate when she accompanied the six sisters from St. Marys to Newark. A mere four months after her arrival with the founding group, she was invested as a novice and given the name Ruperta, probably in honor of the prior in Newark, Rupert Seidenbusch. She was not only the first novice in Newark, but was also the first American Benedictine woman to profess vows of poverty, chastity and obedience rather than the customary Benedictine vows.¹⁶⁹ She would also be the first person to die in the Newark community, on August 12, 1861, at the age of twenty-six.¹⁷⁰

The Newark Community: 1857–1859

The immediate work awaiting the new community in Newark was the staffing of the school which belonged to the newly established St. Mary's parish on High Street. A frame building on Shipman Street, one block away from High Street, was one of three buildings Wimmer had purchased earlier in 1857, and it served as both convent and school for the first thirteen years of the community's existence.¹⁷¹

Virtually nothing is known about life in the community during these early years. There are intimations of poverty and hardship in Nepomucene Ludwig's memoirs and in the correspondence of Wimmer as well. As early as November 6, 1857, funds had been designated by King Ludwig of Bavaria for the Benedictine monks and nuns in Newark. But, as pointed out earlier, the sisters' share of the funds never reached them. Presumably, their only source of income was meagre payment for their work in the school.

In spite of the strained circumstances surrounding the foundation of St. Scholastica Convent in Newark, the spirit of Benedicta Riepp's vision to serve the German immigrants and to
spread the Benedictine Order in America, obviously survived in this small band of uprooted and relocated women. Ordinarily, a community’s first experience of new membership was the receiving of candidates, an event which four or more years later culminated in a permanent commitment ritualized in the ceremony of final profession. The Newark community’s first experience of committed and stable membership occurred only three months after their arrival, with the final profession of Adelgunda Leschall, Benedicta Burkhard, and Alphonsa Hussey. It is rather astonishing to the contemporary observer to note that within two years of its founding, this small burdened community experienced three investitures, two occasions of first profession, and three women’s profession of final vows.

It is even more astounding to realize that these signs of new life and membership were evident during a time when “in Newark, New Jersey, things did not prosper.” The community “struggled until . . . assistance had to come from St. Marys, Pennsylvania.” Some time during the latter part of 1858, assistance came from St. Marys to Newark in the person of Nepomucene Ludwig. Fifty-four years later she recalled how Boniface Wimmer appeared unannounced at St. Marys, and “selected the one capable teacher that was left to us,” herself. She was needed to address the situation of “dissatisfaction, disorder and want of peace.”

Taking leave was a very trying experience, and Abbot Boniface Wimmer met with many objections both from parents and also from the school directors. Poor Mother Theresa Vogel felt the blow seriously. The Sisters cried and pleaded with Abbot Boniface Wimmer for a change but without success. So it had to be, and many of the older sisters spent a sleepless night in bitter disappointment. The next morning, Abbot Boniface Wimmer said an early Mass in the sisters’ chapel, and at 5:00 a.m. he conducted Sister Nepomucene Ludwig to Newark.

Just how humiliating it must have been for Prioress Emmerana Bader to have Boniface Wimmer bring in an “acting superior” to function in her stead, can only be imagined. Little wonder that she and Adelgunda Leschall eventually left to find refuge at St. Benedict Convent in Erie. It is curious that Nepomucene Ludwig was not appointed “prioress” after Emmerana Bader left, even though she continued as “acting superior” until she left for Chicago in 1862. There is some evidence to suggest that another sister, Adelberta Glatt, came to Newark from St.
Marys in 1860, to replace Emmerana Bader as "priorress," until she too left for Chicago in 1862.\(^{174}\)

As would be expected, Nepomucene Ludwig recalled that "order and discipline were soon restored" due to her presence in Newark and the assistance of a priest at the Cathedral.

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\ldots \text{altogether on his own initiative [he] appealed to the charity of his Irish parishioners and penitents. He arranged a "Fair" among them which brought in $1000 which he handed over to the sisters. With additional offerings this sum was increased to $1500 within three years. This money was deposited in the bank for the new convent they had in mind.}\(^{175}\)
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### Community Profile at the Close of 1859

The Roman Decree of December 6, 1859, recognized St. Scholastica Convent, Newark, NJ, as an independent community, separate from its motherhouse in St. Marys, PA, and its "grandmotherhouse" in Eichstätt. At the time of this officially declared independence, the community numbered seven women, plus Nepomucene Ludwig who was "on loan" from St. Marys.\(^{176}\)

The community consisted of three women who were perpetually professed, three who had professed their first vows, and one novice. Among the five whose birth dates are known, the average age was thirty. Alphonsa Hussey was the oldest at forty-five. While six of these women were European-born, only one member, Philomena Spiegel, had entered and received her formation at St. Walburg convent in Eichstätt. Ruperta McBride was the only American-born member.

It may never be known just how this small and struggling community received the news about the rather abrupt and final separation from their American and European motherhouses. They had already lost two members of the original founding group and had dismissed one of their newest members who had been judged unsuitable for their way of life. The question of authority and leadership in their midst was most surely precarious. Their first superior, Emmerana Bader, had left unhappily only five months before, and the role of "acting superior" was held by a woman "on loan" from their original motherhouse. When Boniface Wimmer wrote, "God be thanked that in Erie, in St. Marys,
and in Newark we have excellent convents," and "in Newark, all is well in the convent and in the school," the question of his perspective versus the experience of the women themselves must not only be raised but seriously pondered. 177

Struggle for Existence: St. Cloud, MN

On the same day that the founding group of Benedictine women arrived to establish a new convent on Shipman Street in Newark, NJ, another group of pioneer Benedictine women, who had also left St. Joseph Convent in St. Marys, PA, began the last leg of their journey from St. Paul, MN, to St. Cloud, MN, a long-awaited destination. It has already been noted that the first two groups to leave St. Marys had "the West," or specifically Minnesota, as their intended destination. Neither group got beyond the border of the state of Pennsylvania.

It is fascinating to speculate how the course of Benedictine women's history in the United States, and specifically the story of the St. Cloud community, may have been different had the Indiana, PA, project succeeded. If the group preparing for the Minnesota mission had moved on to St. Cloud as had been planned, the St. Cloud foundation would have begun under Boniface Wimmer's initiative, accompanied by his approval and blessing. Instead, the Minnesota foundation represented the fulfillment of a long-standing dream of Benedicta Riepp, and thereby called down upon itself the wrath, scorn, and disapproval of Boniface Wimmer.

Ambiguity and Lack of Communication

The correspondence of Boniface Wimmer related to the founding of St. Joseph Convent in St. Cloud, MN, on July 3, 1857, indicts Benedicta Riepp and the founding women on several accounts. He claimed that the Minnesota house was established not only without his permission, but in outright defiance of him and without a formal invitation from the ecclesiastical authorities in St.
Paul, MN. The whole venture seemed to him to have been undertaken in a spirit of revolt and disobedience, accompanied by an unabashed disregard for the Rule of Benedict and the canons of the Church. Although the ultimate truth about the migration to Minnesota may never be known, a close examination of the sources reveals the probability of a more rational explanation about why the course of events transpired as it did. Clearly, ambiguity about the limits of Boniface Wimmer’s authority over the Benedictine women in America, and the prerogatives of Benedicta Riepp as their major superior, persisted. In addition, the limitations of written communication, and a simple lack of communication in some instances, play a significant role in a story handicapped by missing data and detail.

The escalating conflict between Benedicta Riepp and Boniface Wimmer, plus the situation of internal strife that had spawned the move to Indiana, PA, and later to Newark, NJ, provide the immediate context for the Minnesota departure as well. Early in March of 1857, as the disenchantment of Emmerana Bader and other women of the St. Marys community intensified against Benedicta Riepp and Willibalda Scherbauer, Demetrius di Marogna, Prior of the men’s community in St. Cloud, wrote to Boniface Wimmer requesting teaching sisters for two locations in Stearns County—St. Cloud and St. Joseph. His request was couched in a report of the growing conflict between two factions in St. Cloud—those who wanted to maintain the school as a public school and those who were fighting for a Catholic school to be staffed by sisters.

Sisters would be the better proposition in any case. If the sisters are promised us, then a few lots will be fenced in for the proper observance of enclosure, and the upper story of the so-called church will be plastered and made habitable.

It seems strange that the Prior was so indirect in his request. In fact, he closed the letter with an intimation that he might engage the School Sisters of Notre Dame from Milwaukee. “These could be given preference, all the more, since they are enjoying a good reputation.”

There are only two extant letters written by Wimmer to di Marogna in the body of relevant correspondence, and neither of these indicate if or how Wimmer responded to his request for teaching sisters at this point in time. However, it is reasonably certain that Wimmer had di Marogna’s request in mind when on
March 21, 1857, solemn profession day at St. Marys, he announced the departure of sisters to Indiana, PA, where they would be prepared for the Minnesota mission.

Since Wimmer himself had left with the group to Indiana, PA, on March 26, he could hardly have been back at St. Vincent's in Latrobe for more than a few days when he received a letter from Bruno Riess, pastor of the newly founded parish in St. Joseph, MN, requesting sisters to teach in his school. Nearly simultaneous with Riess' letter to Wimmer was di Marogna's letter to Benedicta Riepp, requesting sisters for the St. Cloud and St. Joseph missions.

If it is true that by early 1857 Benedicta Riepp had also received a request from Bishop Cretin of St. Paul, MN, for sisters to serve the German Catholic immigrants in his diocese, then by the time she wrote to the Ludwig-Missionsverein on April 13 requesting funds—"The fare for each sister will be at least $40 to $50"—she must have presumed she had the necessary authorizations for the departure. Having heard from Bishop Cretin, and assuming that Prior Demetrius had received permission from his Abbot to make his request to her, there seemed no reason to delay. On the other hand, sheer frustration with Wimmer's sudden transferral of sisters to Indiana, PA, may have driven her to precipitous action.

Rupert Seidenbusch, Prior at St. Marys, wrote his version of the mid-April situation at the convent to Boniface Wimmer on April 24.

Enclosed please find a letter of Mother Walburga Dietrich which she has written according to my advice, for she said she could not stand it here any longer. ... She [Benedicta] wanted to send some sisters to the West, right after Father Demetrius' letter came, so as to act before you; they were already packing their trunks and going away when they were stopped by some person's advice, but not mine, because they would not have told me if they had started; she only told me afterwards that she had received a letter from Father Demetrius and was going to write to you. Some of the sisters whom she wanted to send would not go without your permission, as they have told me. ... Please, therefore, inform me whether I have some right to tell them so or not. That Mother Superior is acting falsely towards me, there is no doubt and therefore I hate the whole story, but what shall I do? I cannot attack her nor tell her anything, because she does not allow me to look into her cards. ... I hope she has written to you whom she intends to send to the West and also that she received $400 from Munich.
In another rather poignant paragraph of the same letter, Seidenbusch observed that Benedicta had "changed a little outwardly, but inwardly she is the same. She hides everything very well, so that you cannot get at her, but she has her own plans." He reported that Benedicta had great confidence in Father Aegidius Christoph, but concluded that she did not trust the prior because "I am too much on your side." Sounding rather powerless to do anything about the situation himself, Seidenbusch also doubted Wimmer’s ability to "change her mind, for she said already she would act this way just because you do not like it." Seidenbusch went on to suggest a visitation, for he believed Benedicta was now "trying to win over those who were opposed to her and, I am afraid, trying to spoil them so as to keep the upper hand."

Perhaps there was some truth in Seidenbusch’s observation that Benedicta "hides everything very well, so that you cannot get at her." In her April 13 letter to the Ludwig-Missionsverein she made no reference to an imminent departure to Minnesota, other than to report di Marogna’s request and to estimate the cost of such a trip for six or eight sisters. She did describe, however, the continued poverty rampant not only in the convent but in the entire colony of St. Marys.

... The land here is not very fertile and most of the inhabitants all around us are poor; by the time the necessities of life are brought from the big cities, they cost a great amount of money... as long as I have been here, life has been very monotonous. The colony is and will remain a poor one, unless a special favor from heaven intervenes—either through the building of a railroad or the erection of several iron-smelters, for which the land itself could furnish metals. Its only treasures are the monastery for men and the convent for women, both of which lie in the center of the colony and furnish all its attraction and from which our Bavarian settlers get their spiritual and in part their physical help insofar as the two religious houses can contact them....

The ambivalence in the remainder of her letter makes it very difficult to determine how specific her plans were. On the one hand, she admitted being "on the verge of losing courage," but "always found hope again in the thought that God does not forsake his own." While others had advised her to escape the poverty of St. Marys and to move into a large city where they could build the best of institutions, she was concerned about "our dear Bavarians in St. Marys who also have 200 girls to send to school." At the
same time that she confessed to being “happy to have our novitiate in a solidly Catholic settlement,” she reiterated the goal to have the Order spread, and to accomplish that “very soon with the help of God’s grace, the more so as a beginning has already been made.”

There is in this country such a great need to have Catholic schools and Christian houses of formation. This was also made clear to me in the letter from the Prior of the Benedictines in Minnesota, to whom I referred above, when he said that if I could send no sisters or did not want to, the parishes in St. Joseph and St. Cloud—as the two missions are called—would have to have lay teachers and a public school and this against the wish of the pastor.189

While Benedicta revealed a great deal about herself in this letter, she did not disclose an immediate plan to pack up and leave. According to Rupert Seidenbusch,190 she had already attempted to leave and was stopped, either before she wrote this letter (early April, after she received di Marogna’s letter) or immediately thereafter (before April 24).

Seidenbusch’s wish that Benedicta would write to Wimmer requesting his permission to go to Minnesota materialized on May 3, 1857, less than ten days after he wrote to his Abbot. In her only extant letter to Wimmer, Benedicta placed all her defenses aside:

I cannot have peace of mind until I express my thoughts to you. I beg you to listen graciously to my earnest request and grant me your kind permission. It would be much easier here at St. Marys if there were fewer sisters. I ask you not to lose patience with me and kindly to keep this matter confidential until I receive an answer from you. . . . I myself would very much like to go to the West and that very soon, otherwise I feel my health will be considerably impaired. I feel very disturbed and under a strain here, so much the more since I never was very happy at St. Marys and never had a desire to be here. You will be more pleased with me in the West than here; there, I shall do and work as they tell and advise me. It is not possible for me to remain here since contentment and inner peace are lacking, as well as happiness. I have tried to force myself in every respect, but I find that it is useless and impossible to do so; I can accomplish little good under these circumstances. You will perhaps smile when I say that I have become very shy and even do not wish to be among my own sisters. Here I feel inert and uninterested, I who in the past was so lively and full of zest. In the West I hope to regain this, be it from the right or from the left, on the land.191
In closing, Benedicta informed Wimmer that she hoped they could leave without needing to use the $400 St. Joseph Convent had received from the Ludwig-Missionsverein in early April. The sisters themselves planned to raise the money for their departure by holding “a small fair” in connection with the closing exercises at the school about the middle of May.

Exactly where and how communication broke down from here on in can only be conjectured. The opening line of Benedicta’s May 3 letter indicated that she was writing to Wimmer while he was in Newark. The opening line of Seidenbusch’s May 22 letter indicated that the Prior was not sure just where Wimmer was at the time—either in Newark where he was expected to be negotiating with Bishop Bailey about his request for sisters, or still “at home” at St. Vincent’s Monastery.

If these lines should reach you at home, please come as soon after receiving them as you possibly can, for they are already packing up for Minnesota and I think are intending to send their boxes away: they are, I heard, packing up all good clothes, linens, etc., even of those sisters who do not wish to go along and use, as it were, a moral thumbscrew to force the sisters to go along. You should, I think, stop this injustice by coming soon and deciding that all those who have professed in St. Marys should stay here. The rest can go to Indiana or Minnesota as they choose. Mother Walburga has declared herself ready to go to Indiana.... Hoping to see you soon, and that you settle all the trouble at once, by telling her [Benedicta] that she has nothing to say here anymore....

Boniface Wimmer’s account of the events that transpired between early April and mid-June of 1857 reveals something about the real complexity resulting from the written communication condensed into a time span of approximately ten weeks. According to him, Willibald Scherbauer made it known some time early in April that “she could go there [Minnesota] with a few sisters, because Prior Demetrius had written to the superior for a few sisters. He did not respond to Willibald directly, but claimed to have written to Benedicta before he traveled to Newark toward the end of April or early May. Wimmer reported the following to King Ludwig’s Court Chaplain:

According to the unanimous witness of all the sisters, Willibald (and Sister Maura, the uncouth cook) were the cause of the changes which the Superior began to undertake. I, therefore, did not give her (Willibald) permission, and merely wrote the Superior telling her not to be hasty about the trip to Minnesota, but wait until Fr.
Demetrius, to whom I had written, could come to a decision that he could support six sisters (that was the number he wanted) and properly house them.\textsuperscript{194}

The above-mentioned letter by Wimmer to Riepp, long lost to history, may well have constituted for Benedicta the necessary "permission" to begin the packing that had so alarmed Seidenbusch in his May 22 letter. Benedicta's above-quoted letter of May 3 to Boniface Wimmer must have followed immediately upon the receipt of his letter to her. That Wimmer filtered Benedicta's defenseless and forthright words through his own growing biases toward her is obvious from the manner in which he summarized the contents of her letter when he wrote to Mueller.

When I traveled to Newark after this [his letter to Benedicta], I received a letter from the Superior in which she confessed she wanted to go to Minnesota; she had never wanted to be in St. Marys and that now she felt so ashamed that she could hardly trust herself to face the sisters. (Why? I cannot imagine because I never spoke disdainfully of her in the presence of the sisters.) And in two months, March to May, she really went to the parish only once but in Minnesota she wanted to begin anew and would take pains to give satisfaction in every way. I should, therefore allow her, also, to go there with eight or ten sisters and that immediately; she would use the 400 gulden received from the Missionsverein for traveling expenses. She could pay the debts with the profits made from the "fair." I was simple enough to believe her and gave the permission, with the repeated warning against haste, because I feared Fr. Demetrius might not yet have a house for them, and to go with six rather than with eight to ten, because my priests could not support so many of them. In any case, they should wait until I come to St. Marys.\textsuperscript{195}

Whether according to his own plans or because Rupert Seidenbusch summoned him to come to St. Marys as quickly as possible, Wimmer did travel to St. Marys and arrived there on June 4, "when they were having examinations." He concluded that the strong and capable women were being coerced into emigrating to the West, and they needed to be apprised of the situation they were facing. On June 6, after Mass,

...I sent the brothers and students out of the church or chapel, and then spoke to the sisters in a fatherly and kindly manner, presented the difficulties of the journey, and of the first beginnings in so cold a land as Minnesota, etc., and repeated: If you arrive there too early, before preparations are completed, or if too many come at once, you will necessarily meet with the greatest inconveniences. Such a step
would be undertaken with mature consideration, not under great emotion or excitement, and with the best intention, in holy obedience, etc. Everything seemed all right. The Superior spoke kindly to me.196

Perhaps Benedicta had written her letter to Prior Demetrius shortly before this visit by Wimmer, or if she wrote it after he left she wasted no time. For on June 14, di Marogna received a letter from her announcing that “the Most Reverend Abbot is now fully agreed to our journey and wishes me to write to you.”197 The letter took him by surprise. To Wimmer he expressed his concern about not having had the time to make adequate preparation for the ten sisters whose arrival she guessed would be “at the end of June or the beginning of July.”

This is truly too hasty. The things you have asked me to do are far from being completed and cannot easily be carried out now since the people are so discouraged on account of the grasshoppers. I had not planned on having them before next spring. Your letter gave me to understand that you, too, were not in a great hurry, as prudence demands. I hope, though, to be able to rent a house in St. Cloud. But where to get the money? where to get the foodstuffs—which may have been planted but are not as yet ripe?198

Departure for Minnesota

The exact date of Benedicta Riepp’s departure from St. Marys, bound for St. Cloud, MN, with eight or ten or twelve or thirteen women was never recorded. That they were gone from St. Marys by the time Wimmer received Prior Demetrius’ June 15 letter is fairly certain. In one account, Wimmer speaks of having exhorted the women at St. Marys, on June 6, against undue haste. He then reported: “I left St. Marys a few days later . . . arrived at St. Vincent’s and then went to Newark. There I heard that a few days after my departure [from St. Marys], the Superior and 13 sisters left St. Marys. . . .”199 According to this time frame, the group’s departure date could have been June 10 or 12, 1857, or even a few days earlier. Travel information provided by the centennial historian of the St. Cloud community corroborates these possible dates.200

The correspondence of Boniface Wimmer insists that there were twelve or thirteen women who left St. Marys destined for St.
Cloud, while Benedicta Riepp, in her letters, never refers to more than ten besides herself. If the theory of additional membership at Erie proposed earlier in this chapter is convincing, then the ten women accompanied by Benedicta Riepp on the first leg of their journey, from St. Marys to Erie, can be positively identified. They were: Willibalda Scherbauer, Evangelista Kremmeter, Gregoria Moser, Gertrude Kapser, Augustine Short, Alexia Lechner, Maura Flieger, Salesia Haas, and two candidates—Prisca Meier and Marianne Wolters. An additional companion on the journey was a twelve-year-old child, Josephine Lejal, “an orphan from the Institute.”

Nepomucene Ludwig in her memoirs, and Boniface Wimmer in his correspondence give chilling accounts of the departure from St. Marys. Ludwig judged the move to be not only one of “complete disruption,” but attributed the departure to the effort of “the ancient enemy of mankind to do away with our beloved convent.”

Preparations were now made for the departure, and for the work of packing. Case after case was being filled. Even altar candelabra and the small melodeon, the only items we had for divine service, were to be sent off. After the departure of the moving van from the convent premises, the house looked like a place that had been ransacked by bandits who held sway. All that could be packed had to go. One, the good God, however, they had to leave with us. Him, they could not take away from the tabernacle. He looked quietly on. He saw the four [Willibalda Scherbauer, Evangelista Kremmeter, Gertrude Kapser, Gregoria Moser] strutting about triumphantly, as well as the rest of us quietly mourning our loss. . . . Storms of adversity, however, awaited these ‘lucky ones,’ where difficulties of all kind were soon to be their lot. Poor Mother Benedicta Riepp met with the hardest reverses. She experienced the utmost humiliation and ingratitude. Such was to be her lot in return for the trust she placed in the moods of the false. On the other hand, those who were left behind met with a better fate.

When the news of the departure reached Boniface Wimmer in Newark, he was told that they

... took not only the 400 gulden, but also the income ($400) from the fair and whatever money they still had, all the linens, the chalice, the Mass book, yes, even all the eggs and candles (made from tallow that I gave them) and left only 25 cents (36 Kr.) in the safe; those sisters who remained were still more disturbed, because she did not appoint a superior, but only ordered Mother Theresa to look out for the others without presenting her to the convent as superior. Those
who remained, nuns and lay sisters (only one lay sister went along), were called traitors.204

Nearly two years later, in a letter to King Ludwig, Wimmer sounded equally incensed as he recalled their departure that day in 1857: “... when the $400 came from the Missionsverein, she, with 13 choir and lay sisters, set out for Minnesota and even took an orphan girl whose relatives live in St. Marys, but whom the girl was not permitted to see. Whatever she could pack up, she took along. In the safe remained 36 kr. and a $300 debt. When she arrived in Erie, she sent Mother Willibalda and six sister companions ahead to Minnesota.”205

Stopover in Erie

Benedicta had been warned against undue haste in early June, but by the time the group reached Erie they could not have received the news, reported to Wimmer by the St. Cloud Prior, about the grasshopper infestation and St. Cloud’s unpreparedness to receive them.206 Perhaps it was simple prudence and practicality that dictated the decision to send only seven members of the group ahead to Minnesota, while the remainder would wait in Erie for a more suitable time to follow them to the West.

It is not known on what basis the four sisters, two candidates, and orphan girl were selected to continue the journey to Minnesota, but they could not have delayed very long in Erie.207 Later correspondence reveals yet another twist in the plan for the group that stayed behind. Scholastica Burkhard, who had been the superior in Erie since its founding a year earlier, was destined to accompany the second contingent to Minnesota.208

Benedicta Riepp’s decision to travel to Europe rather than to accompany the group to Minnesota was neither a whim nor an opportunistic move. Bishop Young of Erie testified to the fact that Benedicta had been thinking about such a trip for at least a year when he wrote that “she had spoken last year of this journey for the purpose of collecting funds and other means.”209 Bishop Georg von Oettl of Eichstätt, writing some time before August 31, 1857, also referred to an earlier desire of Benedicta to travel to Europe.
About a year ago she wrote a woeful letter in which she urgently begged that she be allowed to come here to state her problems personally and receive advice. In reply I had the Prioress [Edwarda Schnitzer] forbid the trip absolutely and commanded her [Benedicta] to state difficulties, desires and proposals, precisely in writing and she would then receive appropriate instructions.\textsuperscript{210}

To collect funds may have been her earliest objective in considering a European trip. However, by June of 1857 the need to ascertain from Rome the extent of her authority and that of Abbot Wimmer in the American foundations from Eichštätt, had become critical.\textsuperscript{211} Against this backdrop, it seems plausible that Benedicta had the European trip in mind when she and her companion left St. Marys several days after Wimmer’s visit. Whether it really was a premeditated plan, or a decision she made immediately upon her arrival in Erie a few days later, remains a mystery. Wimmer believed that the Bishop of Erie had “let himself be trapped” by Benedicta’s request to go to Europe.\textsuperscript{212}

Nevertheless, Benedicta received the necessary written permission of Bishop Young on June 25, 1857, less than two weeks after arriving in Erie.

\textbf{We, Josue Mary Young, through the mercy of God and the grace of the Apostolic See, Bishop of Erie, in the United States of America, through this, attest that We approve of the decision by the present Superior, Benedicta Riepp, of the Benedictine Convent in St. Marystown in our diocese, and a companion, Sister Augustina Short, of the same Order and convent, to travel to Europe in order to mediate personally in the affairs of the above Order which are of concern to Us since the pertinent grounds have been disclosed and are known to Us. We, therefore, recommend the same most earnestly.}\textsuperscript{213}

The Bishop went on in a second paragraph to urge “whatever defense and intercession for assistance is needed, and with word and deed be willing to help bring about a result favorable to the sisters as well as to the Order as a whole.”

When Boniface Wimmer became aware, while in Newark, of the departure of Benedicta and her companions from St. Marys, he immediately contacted Bishop Young with a request that they all be detained in Erie. By the time the Bishop received Wimmer’s letter, part of the group had already left for Minnesota and he, himself, had given Benedicta and Augustine permission to leave for Europe. On July 4, Young explained in a letter to Wimmer that he had been gone on a parish visitation when the letter arrived, and that he might have been “better prepared to treat it [the
authority question] scientifically if you had availed yourself of an earlier opportunity to apprise me of it . . . Till she arrived here, I was unaware of the existence of any difficulty of the kind." Having noted Benedicta’s resoluteness, the Bishop explained that "this departure for Europe had been decided upon, as I perceived, and Sister Benedicta was not to be turned from it."²¹⁴ In an effort to defend Benedicta, and perhaps to forestall any further trouble between the two superiors, he added a final note about her:

It is fair to say, however, that while Sister Benedicta expressed a great deal of obstinate determination in the course she had resolved on, she was at the same time profuse in the expression of her devotion to you and in the acknowledgement of your kindness. She seemed willing to be deposed for the sake of peace and discipline.²¹⁵

The actual date of Benedicta Riepp and Augustine Short’s departure from Erie to Eichstädt was never recorded. That it had to have been shortly after Bishop Young granted his permission on June 25, is evidenced from the European arrival date recorded at St. Walburg Convent in Eichstädt: “On the 14th of July, Sister Benedicta Riepp (superioress) and a companion from America came unexpectedly to visit us to deal with matters concerning the Order. . . .”²¹⁶

Arrival in St. Cloud

Dramatic departures and arrivals punctuated the early experience of Benedictine women in the New World. According to the timetable reconstructed above, it is possible that Willibalda Scherbauer, Evangelista Kremmert, Gregoria Moser, Gertrude Kapser, Prisca Meier, Marianne Wolters, and a little orphan girl, Josephine Lejal, arrived in St. Paul, MN, near or on the day when Benedicta Riepp and Augustine Short left for Europe—June 26 or 27, 1857.²¹⁷ Few people noted the arrival of these women, “for they were in secular dress, wearing the shawls and poke bonnets of the period. But they must have made a pitiable appearance, travel-worn, bewildered, not knowing where to stay for the night.”²¹⁸

It is unlikely that Willibalda Scherbauer and her companions expected to be met that day in St. Paul. Their intended destination was St. Cloud, and Benedicta Riepp had written to the Prior there, alerting him to their arrival some time toward the end of June or
the beginning of July.\textsuperscript{219} It is possible that Benedicta had also written to Bishop Cretin of St. Paul announcing their intended arrival in his diocese, since he had written to her early in 1857 requesting sisters.\textsuperscript{220} But by the time the sisters arrived in St. Paul, enroute to St. Cloud, Bishop Cretin had died, and Father Augustine Ravoux had become the administrator of the diocese.\textsuperscript{221} It is hardly surprising that he had received no advance notice of the arrival of Benedictine sisters in the diocese.

An uncanny twist in the story is that Demetrius di Marogna and Cornelius Wittman had traveled to St. Paul on June 28 for business related to Wittman’s citizenship, and it was there that they learned that the pioneer sisters from St. Marys, PA, were already lodged in that city in the hospital of the Sisters of St. Joseph. The Prior’s frustration with this turn of events was evidenced in a letter he wrote to Boniface Wimmer about two weeks later.

The less prepared I was for the unexpected arrival of the sisters, the more surprised and embarrassed I felt, and I could not check the outcry “overhasty.” Moreover, the whole affair is enveloped in a mysterious obscurity so that I honestly hardly know what to do with these women. Neither by you nor by the superior have they been announced,\textsuperscript{222} neither from you nor from the superior have they documents with them, etc., etc. I spoke with the administrator of the St. Paul Diocese; he was no less surprised than I, and, more than that, was unwilling to accept them; I was to take them with me and care for them. This I then did.\textsuperscript{223}

Willibalda Scherbauer, in her earliest extant letter to Boniface Wimmer, recalled that she and her companions stayed with the Sisters of St. Joseph for four days, and “on the third day we had the happiness of meeting and greeting the Reverend Fathers Demetrius, Benedict, and Cornelius in St. Paul.”\textsuperscript{224} The St. Cloud Prior took them to meet the Vicar General of the diocese on July 2. While she noted that the Vicar was “determined to keep us in St. Paul,” he obviously reneged. For on that very same day the contingent bound for St. Cloud began the last lap of their journey aboard the steamer Nordstern.

On July 3, as the Nordstern neared St. Cloud, it hit a sandbar about two miles below the town, where it remained hopelessly stranded.

The Reverend Prior and all the passengers at once got into a small boat; we also, on the next day, went to land since there was no thought of getting help soon; we were all happy to have this unexpected respite, otherwise we would not have seen the Benedictine
College. Father Prior had told us nothing about it nor had he shown it to us. Now we could not only pass by the small monastery, but we ourselves could enter it and partake of some food. We had been on the ship for three days but had eaten only one meal at table because a meal at table would have cost $.50, a half dollar. We enjoyed the monastery meal very much.

By three o’clock in the afternoon of July 4, as Willibalda remembered the events of that day, they found temporary lodging in the garret of the home of Wendel Maertz. Calling it a “home,” she recalled that it “consisted of only one large room in which there was neither chair nor bench, nor table, nor anything else but the four unplastered walls.”

Here the seven women lived for eight days without beds or furniture of any kind, while Prior Demetrius “wrestled with the problem of what to do with them. Would they send them on to the St. Joseph parish eight miles away where a teacher was needed in the local school but where no house was to be had for a convent, or would they keep them in St. Cloud where they might find a house but where no teachers were needed?” Bruno Riess, the pastor of St. Joseph, offered to vacate his rectory for the sisters. However, to teach in the district school they would have to take teacher examinations and obtain teaching certificates. Having weighed these rather ironic circumstances, Prior Demetrius decided to keep the newly-arrived sisters in St. Cloud. The lay teacher’s contract would expire the following spring, and in the meantime the women could support themselves by giving lessons in music and needlework.

Ten days after the arrival of the six Benedictine women who were the first ever to venture West of the Mississippi, di Marogna informed Boniface Wimmer that he had found a house for them. John Tenvoorde, the owner of a boarding house and entertainment hall, agreed to have the building vacated so as to rent it to the sisters for $250 a year. “I rented it for one year,” explained di Marogna. Then he added, “I hope our dear God will pay the rent!”

The house has two rooms on the ground floor and a spacious refectory with a built-on kitchen. On the second story are found a large room, a smaller one, and a long attic room above the refectory where easily ten or twelve children’s beds can be placed. A well, garden and cellar are also there. . . . The garden and yard are to be enclosed with a high board fence and is to serve as enclosure. The sisters wish to remain together, and are right in this.
Approximately a month after they moved into the Tenvoorde house, Willibalda Scherbauer reflected on the new community’s accommodations.

The house really is very attractive and large enough for the time being, but the school can no longer be there, because the classroom was also to be our refectory. The parlor, which our landlord himself had ordered to be prepared, is very nice and large; right off it is the choir which is ready for use; on the feast of the Assumption we had the pleasure of assisting at the first holy Mass in our little chapel . . . the house is very desireable, but the garden is not enclosed by a fence and that is difficult. The sisters will not be able to go into the garden often.231

She went on to report that they did not yet have many school children, since the layman teaching in the public school was still under contract until the following spring. She felt confident that after the winter was over, many English-speaking people would bring their children to be taught by them. In the meantime, efforts were being made to generate some income for their support.

For German and English instruction we charge $1.00 a month; for sewing and knitting lessons, $1.00; for lessons in fancy needlework, $2.00 per month; drawing, $1.00. For one girl taking a meal here we decided on $80.00 for a year; however, room is not included. For this year we must charge somewhat less, because the people have hardly any money since the grasshoppers have destroyed everything. Neither man nor fruit was spared.232

In spite of the prevailing poverty of the locale, Willibalda reported that people were exceedingly generous to them. “They bring us butter, eggs, chickens; we even received two young pigs, a hen with 8 little chicks, etc. The good people can give nothing else. Next year, they say, will again be good.”233

Having placed aside his original irritation and frustration over the sisters’ unexpected arrival, the St. Cloud Prior was more than concerned about their spiritual and material well-being. “Fr. Cornelius is their weekly confessor. The direction of the sisters, I myself am taking at present because one cannot leave them to themselves. To whom should these poor children with but little money turn, and to whom cling here in this distant and strange country . . . in the long run things cannot go on thus. All the sisters appeared pale, emaciated and ailing.”234 He went on to assure the Abbot that he would look after them, but “I must even beg you that something definite be arranged.” He alluded here to the question of ultimate responsibility for the newly established
community of women in St. Cloud. "As soon as you or the superior [Benedicta Riepp] again take charge of them I shall very gladly retreat." At this early date no one, not even Prior Demetrius, could have imagined or predicted what these six pioneer women and their orphan girl were to endure in their struggle, not only for recognition and approval, but for their very right to exist as a new and respectable community of Benedictine women.

**Founding Women in St. Cloud**

An official document listing the names of the founding women in St. Cloud is non-existent. The earliest record can be found in Demetrius di Marogna's letter to Boniface Wimmer on July 14, 1857. About a month later, Alexius Roetzer, a member of the men's community in St. Cloud, listed the same seven names in his letter to Wimmer. A third source, the census records of 1857, preserved in the archives of the Minnesota Historical Society, verified the arrival of Willibalda Scherbauer, Evangelista Kremmeter, Gregoria Moser, Gertrude Kapser, Prisca Meier, Marianne Wolters and Josephine Lejal on July 4, 1857.

Willibalda Scherbauer was twenty-eight years old when she became the first superior of the newly founded community in St. Cloud. Soon after the first group had left St. Marys, in June of 1856, Willibalda began to fall out of favor with Boniface Wimmer. A year later, she became even more pointedly the butt of Wimmer's thwarted sense of authority and increasing anger with Benedicta Riepp. Within a couple weeks after her arrival in St. Cloud, Wimmer's correspondence was dotted with unflattering comments about her. In one place he referred to her as "quick-tongued" (verschmitzten), and in another he called both her and Benedicta "tramps" (für solche Streich). In a succeeding letter he described her as a "clever rascal" (der Streich), and concluded that she was the "chief factor in all this angry rebellion" (ein Hauptfaktor bei all diesen ärgerlichen Auftritten).

Willibalda's position as superior of the St. Cloud community was precarious from the very beginning. That she had been legitimately named superior of the founding group by Benedicta was verified by di Marogna shortly after their arrival. To Wimmer he
wrote: "A few days ago I received at last a very short announce-
ment from the Superior [Benedicta Riepp] from Erie, that Sister
Willibalda is the Superior of the first group." In this mid-July
letter di Marogna seemed not to question Willibalda’s position as
superior. However, attitudes toward her role changed in the
weeks that followed, and the factors behind the developing ambi-
guity are not entirely clear.

It seems that Boniface Wimmer wrote to the St. Cloud Prior a
couple of times between July 14 and August 19. These letters are
not extant and the precise content remains unknown. One of his
letters to Prior Demetrius contained some conditions he wished to
have communicated to Willibalda and her sisters. The Prior re-
sponded as follows:

I have read to Sister Willibalda the conditions mentioned in your let-
ter. She assured me that the Mother Superior, as well as herself and
the other sisters, are agreed that they had no one else in mind as Su-
perior for their Minnesota foundation than myself, or if need be
yourself or your successor. The Mother Superior and the sisters are
very willing to have a superior in accordance with the prescriptions
of their statutes. It seems to be the purpose and intention of Mother
Superior to petition for definite norms and rules of conduct, which
are to govern the relations between a superior (priest) and the
sister’s convent with its Mother Superior. There were “other points and conditions” which di Marogna
clearly indicated were being observed by Willibalda and the sis-
ters, and would “continue to be observed in the future.” He went
on to inform Wimmer that “the sisters are honored, respected and
loved; they edify the people by their decorous behavior. . . . It
seems to me that, humanly speaking, this overhasty coming of the
sisters was in reality (referring it to the goodness of the Heavenly
Father) by special permission and providence of God, which likes
to transcend and cross the ideas and plans of man."

On the same day the above letter was written, another mem-
ber of di Marogna’s community, Alexius Roetzer, also wrote to
Boniface Wimmer. He referred to a conference, apparently held
by the monks, during which “as quasi-superior, Sister Willibalda
was appointed.”

It was urged that another one should be chosen in her stead because
of her distinct accent. However, in order to prevent scandal and be-
cause no suitable person could be found, an agreement was reached
to notify you immediately and in this way to bring about a satis-
factory solution in an amicable fashion. All the regulations to be
observed and which were decided on in our conference will be forwarded to you.\textsuperscript{244}

Roetzer, like di Marogna, was positive about the sisters, noting that they seemed "to be very industrious in everything and also satisfied with their condition. They might feel a little disconcerted over the stubborn attitude which was shown at the time of their departure for here. At any rate, their good will in everything will merit the blessing of God and a successful outcome."\textsuperscript{245}

Considering the great distance between St. Cloud and Latrobe, PA, Boniface Wimmer could hardly have received these letters by the time Prior Demetrius announced to the sisters, on August 19, Abbot Wimmer's disapproval of the Minnesota foundation. Inferring from indirect references contained in subsequent letters of the people involved, the American Abbot had communicated disapproval of the "runaway nuns"\textsuperscript{246} by demanding 1) a letter of submission to himself from the St. Cloud nuns, 2) the resignation of Willibalda as superior to be followed by her dismissal from the Order, 3) the installment of Evangelista Kremmeter as superior, and 4) a warning that Evangelista not associate with either Willibalda or Benedicta Riepp on her return from Europe. A final crushing blow forbade Prior Demetrius to allow the sisters a chapel, the services of a chaplain, or even to recognize them as regular members of the Benedictine Order. This series of ultimatums was contained in a letter written by Wimmer on July 31, and received by the St. Cloud Prior sometime between August 12 and 19.\textsuperscript{247}

The personal consequences of Wimmer's unreasonable demands were devastating for Willibalda Scherbauer. Without delay she laid bare her heart in a letter to him.

After Mass this morning the Rev. Father Prior informed me that you, Very Reverend Father, are very angry with me and no longer in any way want to consider me a member of the Order. Reverend Father, can you imagine that hearing this and some other things, I could remain without feeling? I do not know what I felt; I could not speak and later could only weep, and still do not know what I should say. What should I think? I can only suppose that this rejection is brought on by my many and former grievous sins. Reverend Father! Why are you so angry with me and want to put me out of the Order? Even if I have much to accuse myself of, and really do reproach myself, I do not know of anything. I believe I can say before God—no, I really do not know anything that could offend you personally; even if much has been reported to you that I should have
said about your Reverence—I say it to you today and under the seal of confession: it is not true.  

As Willibalda continued, her pleading became more intense. "I beg you very urgently, do tell me what I have done. Tell me everything. I will certainly accept it, even if it saddens me deeply. If I could only this one time put an end to your righteous anger and soften it!" As her pleading intensified, she became more and more self-effacing: "Punish me if you wish, only, please, do not dismiss me from the Order. I have promised you that I will be more careful and I will be different. I will never forget this, my promise. I, and all of us, we speak of it often, want to give you pleasure in the future." Recalling how St. Bernard, with "motherly love," forgave a spiritual son who had caused him great trouble and pain, Willibald requested: "Should you not do the same? Should you be able to forsake a poor nun entirely?"  

Defending herself against Wimmer’s intention not only to depose her, but also to have her “put out of the Order,” Willibalda explained:  

Reverend Father, perhaps you think that I wanted to be superior here or that I wanted to present myself as such. No, certainly not. Neither I, nor anyone else, placed me in this position. The Mother Superior alone told me in Erie that the Bishop (Young) suggested to her that, because of certain circumstances and to get some money, she was going to Germany and that meanwhile I should go to St. Cloud with five sisters. She told the sisters to be good and to obey me until she herself would return. That was all that was said; nothing in this speaks of a superior, and I have never taken it upon myself to act as superior; I would be ashamed to desire to do it. It is true that the Reverend Prior calls me superior, and for that reason the people and the sisters also want to call me superior, but I certainly have not permitted it. However, Reverend Father, appoint as superior whomever you think able. I can and will comply.  

It is hardly surprising that Willibald was confused about her role. Within the short space of this excerpt she recognized, whether advertently or inadvertently, four sources of authority outside herself—Bishop Young, Benedicta Riepp, Prior Demetrius di Marogna and Boniface Wimmer—all of whom seemed to have had something to do with the painful situation in which she found herself.  

Perhaps fearful that her pleading might fall on deaf ears, Willibald made yet another plea that the truth be told, in spite of the personal cost to both of them.
Write to me just once and really from your heart and sincerely mention what it is in me that displeases and offends you, I beg you. I can then be again open, as I once was; you must certainly know that yourself. I always had much confidence in you. I believe I am not the only one at fault that this confidence, for some time, though not lost completely, did diminish. However, Father, please forget it all. Do not think of it anymore even if the pain is deep. My pain is also deep to realize that you are so upset and so saddened. If I only knew what I should say—what I should do—to give you confidence in me again. One thing I can do: namely, to improve myself. When you come, I will be very sincere and tell you all. 251

Willibalda remembered that Boniface Wimmer had never answered any of her letters.252 His silence in the past may have driven her to write another letter to him only eight days later, repeating the message and sentiments of her August 19 letter.

I cannot help but trouble you with another letter. Eight days have passed since I received the sad message from the Reverend Prior that you, Very Reverend Father, were so angry that you do not want to tolerate me here anymore. But it is also eight days since I have had no rest day or night. If you cannot believe me, ask the sisters. I was very sick for five or six days so that both the sisters and I thought it was my last. The illness, however, was not so much dangerous as it was painful; there were convulsions which lasted quite long. It was suggested that I be bled, but I did not dare, since it seemed to be more the result of my excitement than an illness. Today, however, it seems quite tolerable. . . . I do not wish to burden you much, but only to renew more strongly the entreaties in my last letter and to repeat them. . . . I can do nothing but weep and be sorry. Dear Father, I beg you to forget and forgive all! 253

Wimmer answered neither of these letters from Willibalda. She was to remain in this pathetic state of unknowing until mid-October when he paid a visit to the St. Cloud community. In the meantime, however, Prior Demetrius recognized the value of Willibalda’s presence in the group and made a recommendation in her favor to Abbot Wimmer. After informing Wimmer that he had, indeed, demanded of Willibalda “that she should resign as superior and beg your pardon,” he added: “The dismissal of Willibalda would be a loss for the sisters from the financial standpoint, because she is the only music teacher and has a number of English pupils. I ask you, therefore, to prescribe a penance for her, to pardon her, and to permit her to remain.” 254

There is a gap in the extant correspondence of Willibalda Scherbauer from August 27, 1857, to July 1, 1863. Consequently, it
is not possible to know from her point of view what transpired during the six weeks that elapsed after she encouraged Wimmer "to come personally. Do come soon; now is the best time to travel, and the trip does not cost so much. I would be sincere and have much to discuss."255 He did come to Minnesota in mid-October, and there were discussions between himself and the sisters in St. Cloud.

Naturally, the different situations were talked over. Sister Willibalda joined in as well as she could, and when she couldn't, she admitted her lack of knowledge and tearfully asked to have her ignorance excused . . . [she] requested me earnestly to regard her and her fellow sisters as I do the other sisters. I did not want to consent to it; but after I convinced myself that they could get along (the monks give them wood), I gave in. I recognized [ich habe anerkant]her as prioress . . . and permitted the new prior, Father Cornelius, to read Holy Mass in the convent on Sundays and Communion days . . . . I gave Sister Willibalda a piece of my mind and spoke the plain truth. If she will be truthful and prudent, things will go well.256

The immediate crisis of authority in the St. Cloud community had passed, but the situation was far from being resolved. Boniface Wimmer may have thought he now had the upper hand with Willibalda and the St. Cloud community. A later source goes so far as to say that "the jurisdiction of the Benedictine sisters in America seemed securely in the hands of Abbot Boniface when he left Minnesota in October."257 In view of the self-effacing letters Willibalda had written to Wimmer in the fall of 1857, it is quite remarkable to discover that early in 1859 she mustered the courage to confront a grave injustice which had been done to the St. Cloud community by him.

In November of 1857 Wimmer assured Baron von Oberkamp that he had asked the prior in St. Cloud to support the sisters "in every way possible, especialy to deliver all firewood for the long and raw winter and to assist them in obtaining property."258 Approximately a year later, Willibalda Scherbauer found it necessary to write to King Ludwig of Bavaria, informing him that "she found out from papers and from the Father Prior that he [the King] had designated 3000 fl. for the Benedictine Sisters in St. Cloud but that the money had been withheld by you [Wimmer] because you needed it."259

As a result of Willibalda's recourse to King Ludwig, Wimmer was severely reprimanded by both the King and his Court Chaplain, who remarked: "I consider it an injustice. This is the third
time: 1) in St. Marys; 2) in Newark . . . and now in St. Cloud." 260
However, the original 3000 florin were never returned to the St. Cloud community. Writing at great length in his own defense, Wimmer managed to convince King Ludwig of his own guilelessness, and of the potential demise of the convent in St. Cloud.

I am not so unsympathetic to the other sex that I would want to enrich the men at the expense of the women and, under ordinary circumstances, I would have preferred to place privations upon my brothers in order to bring relief to our sisters. However, in this case . . . extraordinary benefits would come to the brothers, which would never again or only through the sacrifice of the sisters be attained. 261

Audaciously, Wimmer further stated that he was “morally convinced” that the money would have been used in “an evil way, so to say, thrown away if they [3000 fl.] fell into the hands of the women.” Characterizing the St. Cloud community as a “disorderly convent” of “runaway nuns,” Wimmer justified his behavior with an air of grandiosity.

I would gladly encourage and support a good convent, but our common interest, the honor of our holy Order, and the concern about the eternal salvation of the sisters themselves, as well as of the faithful, oblige us to prevent the growth of an undisciplined convent . . . . I am certain Your Majesty does not have the intention of giving to a group of undisciplined and adventurous nuns the means to settle permanently near my good brothers, or to encourage them by your support and to strengthen them indirectly in their disorderly conduct. 262

In an effort to remain in the good graces of the King of Bavaria, Boniface Wimmer not only succeeded in cutting off an important source of revenue for the pioneer women now struggling to exist in St. Cloud, but managed to discredit them severely in the Court of the Bavarian King. After hearing from Wimmer, the Court Chaplain referred to the community in St. Cloud as the “obstinate clique,” 263 while the King himself expressed his astonishment at “the disorderly and disloyal behavior of the Superior Riepp.”

I wish to state that you are not to return the 3000 fl. in question which I directed to be sent to the Benedictines in St. Cloud for the founding of a convent until the internal affairs of the same have been resolved and the establishment of a convent for the aforementioned Benedictines in St. Cloud does in fact take place. 264

At the same time that Willibalda Scherbauer’s personal integrity and perseverance were being tested to the limit during those
first two years in St. Cloud, her daily contribution to the support of the community and to the people of the area did not go unnoted. Ironically, for the first nine months after their arrival in St. Cloud, Willibalda and her companions worked mainly with Protestants in the area. Having been denied the opportunity to teach in the school until the lay teacher’s contract expired in the spring, they began to give private lessons in music, needlework and religion, as a means of supporting themselves. Since the Catholic immigrants were struggling to make payments on their frontier farms, it was the wealthier class of people in St. Cloud who had the ready cash for such luxuries as music and art. To them Willibalda gave instructions in singing, drawing and painting. So well did Willibalda put her musical background to use that “a piano had to be bought because the Yankees are especially set on taking music. The piano cost $330 with freight and shipping. It bears the name of a firm in Pittsburgh, ‘Charlotte Blum.’ Sister Willibalda likes it very much and praises it highly.”

Willibalda’s musical instruction did not end when in early spring of 1858 the “company of Benedictine nuns” opened a new school term. The local newspaper editor, Jane Swisshelm, noted that not only did the sisters teach reading, writing and arithmetic, but, “in addition to the common branches, German, drawing, music, and needlework. The subjects are taught by ladies of polished manners and unusual proficiency. The school is in much favor with our citizens and is in a flourishing condition.” In June of the following year, Jane Swisshelm again wrote about the school, this time announcing a first “exhibition” to be held on July 7. “It will be in the chapel and those who want seats will have to go early.” A later edition of the same newspaper praised the program and noted that Willibalda herself had played three musical numbers on the piano, with accompaniment by two prominent citizens: “‘The Swiss Air’ by Hunten, played by the Lady Superior and Mrs. Palmer . . . ‘Phantasm’ played by the Lady Superior in masterly style,” and “‘Overture’ on the piano by the Lady Superior accompanied on violins by Mr. Edelbert, and Josephine Leaschell [Lejal].” Jane Swisshelm, a strong Calvinist, abolitionist, and woman suffragist, who sent her daughter to the sisters’ school, was obviously fascinated by these pioneer women from Bavaria, and impressed by Willibalda Scherbauer in particular. In an 1861 edition of her newspaper she wrote:
Up street stands the first church-going bell on the march of civilization. It hangs in a pyramidal shed, in the yard of a convent kept by a company of Benedictine nuns, and is regularly rung for Matins and Vespers by the Lady Abbess, who is small, slight, delicate, graceful, and as accomplished a lady as you could meet in any circle. From her waking the first echoes of these broad prairies in a call to bow regularly at an altar of Christian worship and my wielding the advance press, I am inclined to dispute with the lords of creation the palm of always holding the flagstaff as westward the star of empire takes its way.269

Although little is known about Evangelista Kremmeter before she became the superior of the founding group in Atchinson, KS, in 1863, an extant letter written by her on August 22, 1857, reveals not only a fierce loyalty to both Willibalda and Benedicta Riepp, but also a fearless sense of self-determination. Several thousand miles away from the community of her profession, and only twenty-four years of age, Evangelista reported to Boniface Wimmer that she was teaching grammar, "and over and above, have been entrusted with the arduous task of directing the novices."270 Arduous as that work may have been for her, it seemed not as impossible as the mere suggestion of replacing Willibalda as superior. It was Willibalda herself who broke the news to Evangelista that she was about to be deposed by Wimmer and replaced by her as superior of the new community. Wimmer had informed Prior Demetrius of his wishes in this regard, who in turn apprised Willibalda of the same. Willibalda reported her subsequent conversation with Evangelista as follows:

I told Sister Evangelista what you wanted and how you wanted it to be. I also told her that I would be willing and yes, with pleasure, to leave everything to her: I had not yet finished speaking when she became excited and completely confused. She has been crying now for five days. I do not know why. She only says she is worried about something but cannot speak of it to anyone. And she really has not spoken of it to anyone; she also begged me for permission to write to you, and so I said nothing more to her.271

Evangelista did not delay long in speaking her mind to Boniface Wimmer. On August 22, 1857, she wrote:

Since we have received from Fr. Prior the various points according to which you, Father Abbot, want to regulate our lives, a different feeling has taken possession of me. In the first place, I feel incapable of the tasks which you have assigned me; and secondly, it is impossible for me not to associate with Rev. Mother Superior and Mother
Willibalda without any reason on my part for such conduct; and thirdly, since I do not possess the required knowledge and experience necessary to maintain order and discipline in a cloister, I believe these will be sufficient reasons for you to spare me from such a responsibility. If they must be complied with, I feel constrained to leave and seek my salvation in a stricter order.272

Although Evangelista Kremmter viewed herself as unsuited for the role of superior, it is clear from the same letter that she believed her missionary efforts were needed “in this region, where everything is still primitive and people uncultured... How much the sisters are needed here! There are girls here 15 years old who still do not know the alphabet nor the Ten Commandments, not even the Our Father.”273

Gregoria Moser held the distinctions of having been in the first group of Benedictine novices in America, of having been in the only group of American Benedictine women ever to profess solemn vows, and of having been a foundress in Minnesota, all before she had reached the age of twenty-one. An early source reported that Gregoria was “teaching in the industrial school,” in St. Cloud, 274 which probably meant that she gave lessons in needlework and sewing. In addition, she served the new community as “portress.” Nothing else is known about Gregoria’s life in the St. Cloud community until 1863, when she became a member of the founding group in Atchison, KS.275

Gertrude Kapser had been a novice with Gregoria Moser at St. Mary’s. She too had been very young at the time, only sixteen, and could never have imagined that three years later she would be in St. Cloud, “teaching in the industrial school,” directing the choir, and in charge of the laundry.276 Her final profession took place in St. Cloud,277 and if the data preserved about the first six years of the new community in Minnesota is accurate, Gertrude was the first Benedictine woman to profess final vows in the mission territory west of the Mississippi. Her formula of profession, written in Latin, read as follows:

I, Sister Mary Ann Gertrude, promise before God and his saints stability and conversion of my morals, obedience, poverty and chastity according to the Rule of St. Benedict and the Statutes of this monastery of Saint Cloud, in the presence of Reverend Mother Willibalda Scherbauer, Prioress.278

Little else is known about Gertrude Kapser’s life in the St. Cloud community before she was missioned to Atchison, KS, in April of
1865. There is one minor reference to her, however, in a letter Boniface Wimmer wrote to the prioress in Erie, who had lived with Gertrude in the early years at St. Marys. Having visited the community in St. Cloud, he reported that “these sisters were all well except Gertrude who had a very swollen face.”

Prisca Meier and Marianne Wolters could not have experienced much of Benedictine life before they became founding members of a community far away from the convent of their entrance. It is not known how long they had been candidates at St. Marys before coming to St. Cloud. Understandably, there was a good deal of concern about these two young women expressed in the relevant correspondence of the time.

Given his disapproval of the St. Cloud community, it seems that Abbot Wimmer wrote to Prior Demetrius suggesting that both Marianne and Prisca be asked to leave the convent. Concerning the former, di Marogna responded to Wimmer as follows:

I informed Maryanna Wolters concerning what you wrote about her. She expressed her fear of returning to the world, and begged to be allowed to remain with the sisters. The confidential information with which she furnished me, is of such a nature that I now ask you to permit her to remain in the convent. Besides, it would be manifestly quite impossible now to find a place for her to stay, or to find a suitable husband for her. And even if the right kind of man could be found for her, because looked for, would we not have to fear the jibes and mockery of the Yankees and the bad Catholics? What a sorrow for the good Catholics and for Maryanna herself?

Willibalda Scherbauer also wrote to Wimmer asking, “What should we do for Marian and Priska? I was never very much for accepting the former because of her being so sickly. But I do not think she will take it unless perhaps you speak to her yourself. However, she does very well in English as well as in music.”

About Prisca Meier, however, Willibalda was positive. “Priska, I know for certain, you cannot get to leave again. All of us would like to speak for her. She is a good child and does nothing to displease anyone.”

Prisca and Marianne, as candidates, were under the direction and guidance of Gertrude Kapser until they became novices. In spite of Wimmer’s suggestion that they leave the convent, both of them “earnestly asked the permission of Gertrude Kapser to be admitted to profession.” Prior Demetrius, in turn, relayed their request to Abbot Wimmer, seeking at the same time greater
clarification regarding the authority to receive and profess candidates in St. Cloud.

I gave them the answer that I would first write to you. And in your letter you wrote that I, in the first place, and you, if necessary, had the right to decide in the reception of novices and their profession. I understand it in this way: the sisters here may, with the knowledge and consent of the local superior, accept candidates and allow novices to make profession. This is in accordance with the law of the Church, the Holy Rule, and the Statutes; in case of necessity and where there is doubt, your advice and orders must be sought and abided by. 286

The "fate" of Prisca and Marianne was not decided until Boniface Wimmer visited St. Cloud in October, 1857, and seemed contingent upon Willibalda Scherbauer's own fate as superior of the new community. At the same time that Wimmer agreed to recognize Willibalda as the prioress, he also "gave the habit to Priska and Marianne." 287 The exact date of this first investiture in St. Cloud is unknown, but on that October day Prisca and Marianne received their new monastic names, Amanda and Ehrentrude, respectively. Extant records indicate that both of them professed vows on May 17, 1860, the same date as Gertrude Kapser's final profession. 288

The seventh member of the founding group was a little orphan girl, Josephine Lejal, affectionately referred to as "Fini." 289 Precisely how long she had been living with the sisters at St. Marys before the departure to Minnesota, is not known. Having been born in New York in 1845, 290 she was only twelve years old when she journeyed with them from Pennsylvania to Minnesota. Alexius Roetzer commented on her presence in the St. Cloud group as he wrote to Wimmer: "As far as the little Leshall is concerned, I do not know anything about her. I could not find out anything concerning her from Fr. Cornelius because he himself didn't know anything." 291 Abbot Wimmer himself spoke about her in letters to Mueller and King Ludwig, identifying her as "an orphan from the Institute, who had a knowledge of music." He further claimed that even though Josephine's relatives lived at St. Marys she was not permitted to see them before she left for Minnesota. 292 After seeing her when he visited the St. Cloud community in the fall of 1857, his only comment to the prioress of Erie was that "Josephine Lejal likes it there." 293
Presumably, Josephine attended the sisters' school when it opened in the spring of 1858. According to an article in the local newspaper, she played the violin and accompanied the "Lady Superior" on the piano in the school's first public recital. She appeared on the program a second time, along with six other young girls who enacted a dialogue entitled "The Chimney Sweep." 294

It is not too surprising that Fini Lejal eventually entered the novitiate to become a formal member of the St. Cloud community. Four years after her arrival in St. Cloud, Josephine was invested as a novice and received the name Adelaide. On March 27, 1863, she professed her vows, and eight months later became a founding member of the community in Atchison, KS. 295

The St. Cloud Community: 1857–1859

Life in the newest daughterhouse of St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, PA, was a struggle for bare existence for ten to fifteen years after the group's arrival in St. Cloud on July 3, 1857. The community was burdened by dire poverty, not wanted or needed for the work they had come to do, and scorned, oppressed and rejected by Boniface Wimmer. A review of the events that transpired before the Roman Decree of 1859 bears witness to a miracle of survival.

For approximately ten months after their arrival six women, an orphan girl, and six boarding students lived in the Tenvoorde House. After discovering that they were not wanted as teachers in the local school, the sisters opened an industrial school in their home, offering instructions in singing, drawing, painting, sewing, knitting and needlework. In addition they tutored students in German grammar, the English language, and religion. For these lessons, the sisters charged from one to two dollars per student, per month. Speculating about what their total monthly income may have been, one of the St. Cloud monks wrote: "How many pupils they have, and what payment they are receiving I do not know. I recall vaguely that a short time ago I heard they were receiving eight to ten dollars every month." 296

Poverty and privation, however, were not the worst of enemies suffered by the St. Cloud Benedictines during those early months of their founding. The crisis over Willibalda Scherbauer's
position as superior, coupled with Boniface Wimmer’s initial disapproval of their departure from St. Marys, resulted in deep pain for the struggling community. Wimmer’s negativity also had its affect on the attitude of the St. Cloud monks toward their newly arrived counterparts from Pennsylvania. Prior Demetrius recognized, at least in part, the pain of “the whole sad affair,” and told Abbot Wimmer that “what hurts the sisters most, as they say, is the often repeated accusation on the part of the brothers that the sisters live at the expense of the monks, as if they were lazy women afraid of work.”

In spite of the earnestness with which Willibalda Scherbauer had pleaded with Wimmer to come to visit them, his October visit subjected her to grave humiliation and severe reprimands. Nevertheless, their encounter with one another resulted in important decisions affecting the immediate future of the entire community. By the time Abbot Wimmer left Minnesota, bound for St. Louis and Kansas, 1) Willibalda was reinstated as prioress, 2) the community had received their first two novices—Amanda (Prisca) Meier and Ehrentrude (Marianne) Wolters, 3) the new prior, Cornelius Wittmann, was permitted to celebrate Mass in the convent on Sundays and Communion days, and 4) the monks were instructed to provide the women with firewood for the winter, as well as to help them find a home of their own to replace their rented quarters in the Tenvoorde house.

The dust of controversy settled somewhat after Boniface Wimmer’s visit, and the new community’s energies turned necessarily toward survival for the winter and the plan to open a parochial school when the lay teacher’s contract expired in the spring. As Wimmer’s attention turned more and more toward his own defense against the accusations implicit in the issues Benedicta Riepp was raising in Rome, he seemed less adamant against the women in St. Cloud. Writing to King Ludwig on December 7, 1857, he admitted that in Minnesota the sisters “do much good for the Catholics and even for the Protestant young ladies, and they bear privation cheerfully.”

Early in the spring of 1858, two significant changes in the life of the St. Cloud community took place simultaneously. The seven women moved from the Tenvoorde house to a home of their own on the upper floor of the church. Their new space measured forty by twenty-four feet, and had a partition or two with a bit of plaster on the walls. Although the structure had been poorly built,
and failed to protect them from the cold Minnesota winds, it was finally a place of their own. The lower level of the structure contained the church and a classroom, where on the first day of school that spring they welcomed twenty students.

The first school term proved to be anything but dull. The sisters and children were visited one day by the Chippewa Chief, Hole-in-the-Day, and two of his warriors who proudly displayed several Sioux scalps in the streets of St. Cloud. Another occasional distraction from the routine of school life was the arrival of the Red River ox carts carrying furs and meats from Pembina to St. Paul. On one occasion a caravan of one hundred and forty carts moved across the prairie to St. Cloud, camped overnight, then traveled along main street past the school and convent on its way to the Mississippi ferry. Life in the West for these young Benedictine women from the East must have seemed at times both treacherous and awesome. 300

Early summer of 1858 was a memorable season for the Benedictine women in St. Cloud, not only because of their move to a new home and the opening of the first school term, but also because of the arrival of Benedicta Riepp. Boniface Wimmer had “covered all the bases” in an apparent campaign to discredit Benedicta, not only in the American convents, but on the European scene as well. From the time Benedicta left for Europe in July, 1857, until she arrived in St. Cloud in May or June, 1858, Wimmer had written letters to Joseph Ferdinand Mueller, chaplain to the court of the King of Bavaria, to King Ludwig I several times, and to Baron Rudolph von Oberkamp, the business manager of the Ludwig-Missionsverein. Mueller, in turn, had conveyed Wimmer’s sentiments to Georg von Oettl, Bishop of Eichstätt, who kept Edwarda Schnitzer, Prioress of St. Walburg Convent, apprised of the situation between the American Abbot and the major superior of the Benedictine women in America. 301

A careful analysis of the correspondence reveals a growing mistrust of Benedicta Riepp on the part of the Bishop of Eichstätt, who had forbidden the Prioress of St. Walburg Convent to permit Benedicta to come to Europe in the first place. 302 This explains, at least in part, why Benedicta and Augustine were so coldly received by their own sisters in Eichstätt. In a letter written to Scholastica Burkhard some time later, Prioress Edwarda Schnitzer referred to Benedicta’s “ten very sorrowful months separated, for most of the time from my sisters.” She went on to explain:
I begged Mother Benedicta to beg pardon in humility of the Very Reverend Lord Abbot and fulfill her duty of obedience. A superior of a convent must even more than others, I say, be faithful to the holy vow of obedience. How dangerous is a superior when she allows herself to be swayed by the thought that she alone now understands everything and wants to know nothing of the advice of a higher superior or of a well-meaning confessor.303

That Wimmer’s correspondence influenced key people in Europe is clear from another letter by the Bishop of Eichstätt. Writing to Mueller, von Oettl admitted the following:

The reports of Abbot Boniface and of Fr. Rupert [Seidenbusch] have strengthened still more my opinion of the condition in the women’s branch of our (Benedictine) colony in America, and in particular, of the character of Mother Benedicta. . . . The problem really by right lies in the jurisdiction of the Lord Archbishop as Director of the Missionsverein and I have no jurisdiction at all since I have definitely dismissed Mother Benedicta.304

Boniface Wimmer’s attitudes toward Benedicta in the correspondence of 1857 and 1858 were unbending and categorical. To Oberkamp he asserted: “I am right on all points, and Benedicta can never again be admitted into our priories.” He reported that she “gossiped only too much,” and that “through her proud, obstinate conduct contrary to the Rule, Sister Superior will dig a pit for herself and fall in.” He further accused her of thinking “herself smarter than I and all my brothers,” and concluded that “the entire clergy is against her! The sisters are against her. All the prioresses and nuns of the four convents are against her.”305 To Mueller he described Benedicta as a person who was “too self-willed, does not take advice, and still does not perform her duty satisfactorily.” He admitted that “at first she was very good. I can easily forgive her a little stubbornness because it is helpful for a superior, provided she does not go too far. . . . For a long time she was loved by almost all the other sisters.” Then he concluded that “through her own fault she was feared, frequently even scorned. In America, she can now hardly start anything worthwhile. I do not fear her appeal to Rome. That I am in the right is clear enough.”306

Although coming to Minnesota was a long-standing dream realized for Benedicta Riepp, it seemed like banishment given the strained circumstances under which it came about. In the first place, Benedicta recalled that “the Reverend Prelate not only used every method to prevent my return to America . . . but after I had
returned, he did not permit me to go to the sisters in the convent in St. Marys." Ironically, it was Bishop von Oettl who encouraged her "to return as soon as possible so that, in case the Sacred Congregation required a visitation, which would probably happen, I [Benedicta] would be present as a witness." He had made the necessary travel arrangements for her and her traveling companion, Augustine Short, and the convent in Eichstätt provided 600 fl. for their return trip. The two women had suffered ostracism in Europe, and now it awaited them also in the place they had called home ten months earlier.

When Benedicta was excluded from the convent at St. Marys, she had recourse to the Bishop of Erie, who had granted her the permission to travel to Europe a year earlier. Neither Benedicta nor Wimmer indicate the nature of the Bishop's response. Benedicta simply stated that "the Reverend Prelate [Wimmer] commanded me to leave Erie and go to Minnesota, which I did." Wimmer reported his version as follows:

I did not permit her to return to St. Marys anymore, nor to Erie. She didn't have the courage to go to Newark, so she was ordered to go immediately to St. Cloud and stay there under obedience to the prioress [Willibalda Scherbauer] whom she is already starting to annoy. She is also causing trouble for the prior, Father Cornelius Wittmann. The only thing for her to do is either to submit herself or to leave the Order entirely.

Elsewhere in the letter Wimmer intimated another kind of victory. Admitting that Benedicta had caused him "much disappointment" for some time, he now believed that the "greatest anguish" was over. "The tooth is pulled out. She laid the snare for herself by deserting her position without being forced to."

There is no extant evidence pointing to the nature of the trouble Benedicta was having in St. Cloud with Willibalda and Wittmann, as reported by Wimmer. But that she was still suffering under the cloud of Wimmer's wrath is evidenced in her letter to Cardinal Barnabo of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith:

... I feel encouraged to turn to you, even if somewhat timidly, in my distress. The affair [question of jurisdiction] is taking very long and the Reverend Prelate uses every opportunity to harass me and to make me appear contemptible to all. It is too painful for me to say much about this. He also has my letters intercepted, not allowing them to be forwarded.
She confessed in the same letter that “in this convent I felt as though I were in a place of banishment since no sister was allowed to associate with me. Then because the sisters in St. Cloud did not obey this command, he withheld the 3000 fl. which King Ludwig of Bavaria had recently granted the sisters for making a new foundation in St. Cloud.”

Although she was disheartened, exhausted, and presumably ailing, it is difficult to imagine that the community in St. Cloud was not happy to receive Benedicta Riepp into their midst. Unfortunately, little is known about the role she played there for the last four years of her life. Presumably, she lived the common life as did the other members of the community under the leadership of Prioress Willibalda Scherbauer. It is not known what work she performed in the St. Cloud community, or even if she was physically able to work at all. Whether she was aware of it or not during these years, her fate was still being discussed at the hierarchical level in Rome as well as in America, and the question of where she would be allowed to live out the remainder of her days would not be settled until January of 1861.

Benedicta Riepp could well have thought that Boniface Wimmer’s tactics had changed very little while she was in Europe. It was only a few short months after she arrived in St. Cloud that Willibalda Scherbauer and the community were informed that the Abbot had withheld money designated for them from the Ludwig-Missionsverein, just as he had earlier withheld money from the women in St. Marys and Newark. Benedicta herself had written a “begging letter” to King Ludwig sometime before October 17, 1858. The King had referred the matter to his Court Chaplain, who in turn informed Wimmer that he had “directed 3000 fl. for the Benedictine Sisters in Minnesota.” He added that the money “will come to you with the request that the receipt of the Mother Prioress be sent directly to His Majesty, King Ludwig. Now, do you very nicely give the money to the sisters so no new complaint will be brought against you.”

It was some time between October 21, 1858, and March 15, 1859, that Willibalda Scherbauer filed her complaint against Boniface Wimmer in a letter to King Ludwig. Benedicta, too, had written about the intercepted money to Cardinal Barnabó on January 4, 1859. Up to this time Mueller had been supportive of Ludwig’s decision to send money to the “newest and the poorest” of the Benedictine convents in America. Mueller had designated
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St. Cloud as the house most in need. But now, writing to Wimmer, he admitted that he would not have done so had he known that “it was there that the obstinate clique lived. (Why did you not inform me secretly?)... Had I known that Benedicta was there, I would certainly have opposed it and fought against it.”

In a series of ensuing letters, Wimmer cleverly justified his disposal of the money, and managed to clear himself completely of the misappropriation charges. He received final word on the matter from King Ludwig, through Mueller, “not to pay the 3000 fl. to Mother Willibalda until the decision comes from Rome as to whether a convent of Benedictines, independent of you, may be erected or not in St. Cloud. If no convent is allowed to be erected, His Majesty has directed me to tell you that he reserves for himself the right to decide about the 3000 fl.”

The community of women in St. Cloud failed to receive recognition in the Roman Decree of 1859. Consequently, Abbot Wimmer hastened to offer King Ludwig his “most humble suggestion” concerning the 3000 fl.—“that your Majesty would deign to let them come to St. Ludwig Priory in St. Cloud because this is of far greater importance than a women’s convent... it will soon become a beautiful abbey named after your Royal Majesty.... Not for anything would I want the gracious name Ludwig attached to an unimportant little monastic institute.” In the course of time, the monks of St. Cloud received the money, and the women learned of their final loss of the 3000 florin. The loss most surely constituted a financial setback, but neither this nor their failure to gain canonical recognition were able to bring about their demise.

While the St. Cloud convent was of dubious standing in the eyes of Boniface Wimmer and key European figures, Bishop Thomas Grace of St. Paul evidenced his approbation of the Benedictine women’s convent by a visitation in September of 1859. While there, he received three young women into the novitiate. The Bishop’s visit and the community’s second investiture of novices were events of great significance for the new foundation. Presumably, no bishop would have admitted members into a community with a future as precarious as Abbot Wimmer believed this community’s to be.

Bishop Grace’s increasing admiration of the Benedictine women was noted some time later in his diary. After his second visit to their convent he wrote the following:
The Bishop’s stay among these good sisters which gave him an occasion to witness their piety, their innocence, their heavenly mindedness and real spiritual happiness was one of the brief periods granted seldom to men in which a foretaste is had and a conception obtained of the felicity of Heaven. He will never forget it or the dispositions of soul at the time which made him very susceptible of such enjoyment for which he will be ever thankful to God and will ever regard it as a special grace intended for some purpose of His Providence which it is hoped will meet its due fulfillment through His most Holy will.

The Absence of St. Cloud in the Decree of 1859

St. Joseph Convent in St. Cloud, MN, did not receive official approbation in the Roman Decree of December 6, 1859. Several factors already discussed, such as the stormy relationship between Boniface Wimmer and Willibald Scherbauer, and Benedicta Riepp’s controversial residence in St. Cloud, provide a partial explanation. Boniface Wimmer’s inability to deal with these women without wielding complete control over their lives accounts for the negative reports he forwarded to the European hierarchy regarding the St. Cloud foundation. To an objective observer, the character of the St. Cloud house resembled that of the other foundations in St. Marys, Erie, and Newark. By 1859, all four houses had superiors approved by Wimmer, all were poverty-stricken but engaged in some kind of self-supporting work, all were wanted and needed by the local bishops, and each house had already received new members under the aegis of either Abbot Wimmer or the bishop of the diocese in which the house was founded. If formal criteria for the approbation of new Benedictine foundations in America existed, they were not articulated in the Decree. Rather, the Decree was drafted as a response to Abbot Wimmer’s request that the “three convents of sisters . . . in the cities of Erie, Newark, and Marystown . . . be approved by Apostolic authority.”

On March 17, 1858, Alexander Cardinal Barnabo, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, had written to Boniface Wimmer, asking him to express his views regarding the five points Benedicta Riepp had raised against him. It was in response to Barnabo’s letter that Wimmer drafted his
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request for the formal approval of the convents of St. Marys, Erie, and Newark, clearly omitting the St. Cloud convent from his "Proposals." The propositions he forwarded to Rome at this time were fourfold. He asked that:

1. The convents of St. Marys, Erie, and Newark be recognized as priories and be incorporated into the Congregation of monks and placed under the jurisdiction of the Abbot President of that Congregation. 2. That the American Benedictines be allowed to make solemn vows without being enclosed. 3. That they be permitted to teach in public and private schools. 4. That they be allowed to pray the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin instead of the Divine Office.330

It is difficult to understand Boniface Wimmer's omission of the St. Cloud community, especially in view of his visitation of that convent in October of the previous year, and the letters he wrote to key people in Europe after the visit. In reporting the situation to Baron von Oberkamp approximately one month later, he summarized the status of the American convents: "I established prioresses everywhere for three years; out of one monastery three are made; we have now four prioresses: in St. Marys, Erie, Newark and St. Cloud. All posts are filled."331 Even after his July 11, 1858, request he continued to speak of the "four new priories."332

In actuality, it appears that Abbot Wimmer recognized the St. Cloud community in the same way that he acknowledged and claimed jurisdiction over the other three foundations. Thus, what motivated him to exclude St. Cloud from the formal request for canonical approval remains a mystery. Benedicta Riepp's presence there may have been problematic enough for him to act as he did. Perhaps he also believed that the community had little chance of survival, due to the famine caused by the grasshopper plague and the hostile attitude of the townspeople toward parochial education.

Although the scope of this chapter ends with the Roman Decree of 1859, it seems appropriate to comment briefly on how the St. Cloud house was regarded in the years immediately following the Roman decision. Abbot Wimmer concluded in a letter to King Ludwig that since the Minnesota foundation "was undertaken in a spirit of stubbornness and of the grossest misinterpretation of the Holy Rule and the Canons," it could, of course, not be sanctioned. He went on to say:

I really do not yet know what we will do or should do with these nuns, nor what they themselves want to do or become. Since from
now on their vows are only simple, they could, if they wish, return to the world, or if they prefer, enter another convent; or perhaps, when newly organized, if I get the proper guarantee, to make an attempt at a permanent convent. Much depends on how they, especially Mother Benedicta, will behave who, I very much fear, will not be submissive. 333

In response to the above letter King Ludwig finalized his decision about the money he had earlier earmarked for the St. Cloud foundation. Taking seriously the omission of St. Cloud from the Roman Decree, he wrote: "... since the founding of a Benedictine convent in Minnesota in the Diocese of St. Paul did not materialize, the 3000 fl. sent in October 1858 by me for that purpose should now be used for the founding of a Priory of St. Ludwig in St. Cloud. . . . " 334

In August of 1861 Abbot Wimmer wrote again to King Ludwig acknowledging "Your Majesty’s letter in which a royal support is promised me for next October for our Benedictine institutes in America." That the Benedictine women in St. Cloud were not to be the beneficiaries of this royal support is clear from the fact that he failed to mention them in what appeared to be a general report concerning Benedictine women in America.

Our Benedictine sisters are now, besides St. Marys, also in Erie, Newark, Covington and Chicago, and prove themselves excellent teachers everywhere and at the same time devout religious. The blessing of God is with them. We began in every place with very meager means, yes, at the beginning with no means. But in a short time the tender sprout of the first planting will grow and soon develop into beautiful blossom. 335

While Boniface Wimmer and the European hierarchy continued to ignore the existence of a Benedictine community of women in St. Cloud, Bishop Thomas Grace of St. Paul functioned in regard to the community as if there were no question about its legitimate existence and its survival in the future. In September of 1861 he visited the community a second time and expressed his approbation of the Benedictine foundation by professing and investing four new members. 336

Some final words of reference to the St. Cloud foundation in the relevant correspondence of Boniface Wimmer appear in letters to King Ludwig. In one letter he informed the Bavarian King that he had been to Minnesota and had seen "the older Benedictine convent in St. Cloud, whose former superior was Benedicta Riepp who had caused so much annoyance."
She died last spring, and since then everything there has been put in order again. I really was able to come to an agreement and make arrangements with the present Prioress [Willibalda Scherbauer] so that from there a small convent of Benedictine sisters can be erected in St. Joseph.\textsuperscript{337}

In an 1865 letter Wimmer reported that the Benedictine women in America were doing well. "They have now, besides the convent in St. Marys, convents in Erie, Newark, Covington, Chicago, Atchison and St. Cloud, where in each place they have a day school along with a resident school for older girls."\textsuperscript{338} In actuality, however, St. Joseph Convent was no longer located in St. Cloud. In late November, 1863, the community had moved its motherhouse to St. Joseph, MN, where Evangelista Kremmert, Dominica Massoth, and Boniface Bantle had been living and working since the fall of 1862.\textsuperscript{339}

That the community in St. Cloud possessed virtual canonical sanction can be concluded from a document sent to Boniface Wimmer by Cardinal Alexander Barnabo of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith on June 23, 1866. The document contained Rome's answer to questions that had been raised by Wimmer regarding the monasteries and convents he had established in America. Of the fifteen points in the document, the last three dealt with problems relating to American Benedictine women. The final point concluded with the assertion "that the monasteries of those nuns already founded [in America] be canonically erected."\textsuperscript{340}

Community Profile at the Close of 1859

At the time of the Roman Decree, St. Joseph Convent in St. Cloud consisted of four perpetually professed members, one in temporary vows, five novices, and an orphan girl. Among the ten formal community members, the average age was twenty-four. Benedicta Riepp was the oldest at thirty-four and Bernarda Auge, age nineteen, was the youngest. Seven of the women were foundresses from St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, PA, and three young women had entered in St. Cloud between July, 1857, and December, 1859.\textsuperscript{341}

Of the ten members, seven were European-born, two American-born, and one was Canadian. Only two women, Benedicta
and Willibaldia, had entered and received their formation at St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt. Two of them, Evangelista Kremmert and Gregoria Moser, had been members of the first and only group of Benedictine women to profess solemn vows in America.

The centennial historian of the St. Cloud/St. Joseph community reflected on the role of women in history-making, observing that “the flames women fan do not become the roaring fires that lay low whole continents for Christ. Women perhaps are skilled in tending tiny sparks, the feeble flames that glow and glimmer again only in the warmth of encouragement.” At the close of 1859, the “feeble flame” of the first Benedictine community of women west of the Mississippi appeared destined to be snuffed out, a “tiny spark” definitely in need of tending.

The Original American Motherhouse:  
St. Marys, PA

A Remnant Community: 1857–1859

Boniface Wimmer believed that the departure of Benedicta Riepp and eleven companions from St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, PA, in mid-June of 1857, was a plot “to destroy St. Marys because she realized that I would no longer permit the evil goings-on to continue.” Five months after their departure he continued to impute destructive motives to Benedicta, explaining that “she could have sent seven sisters to Minnesota with my fullest consent, but she took away thirteen [sic] in spite of the agreement. She wanted to take away all who were useful for anything so that we would have to break up St. Marys.” Toward the end of the same letter he reported that Benedicta “glowed with envy and jealousy” at his suggestion of “a new foundation [Indiana, PA] in order to create something more successful with a more tractable superior. Then the fire broke out brightly . . . St. Marys should go to pieces because of it. She ran away, and 12 [sic] sisters with her; she sailed to Germany. Everything is in confusion.” Confidently, Wimmer claimed that he could prove “through sworn statements” that Benedicta’s plot to destroy St. Marys was premeditated.
She wanted, by all means, to take along Bonifacia (the music teacher) and Nepomucene (the principal and teacher) because then the school would have to be closed. However, they did not go along. The lay sisters unanimously declared they would not go along where Willibalda was. To Sister Hermenia [sic; Xavier] (sister of Alexia) she had positively said that she wanted to break up St. Marys and, at the same time, that she was not going to Minnesota, but to Europe taking Sister Augustine along.  

Fifty-six years later, an eye witness to the events of 1857, recorded similar impressions regarding the departure for Minnesota.

Here was a formulated plan which could have put an end to the very existence of St. Marys, Pennsylvania. . . . In accordance with that plan, the best teachers and workers, in a word, the most capable sisters were selected for the missions. . . . Four of the Sisters destined for the missions in the West had the courage to remain in St. Marys. . . . The sisters were not slow in perceiving that such a plan amounted to nothing short of complete disruption.

Boniface Wimmer had visited the community of women at St. Marys in early June of 1857, to warn Benedicta against a premature departure for Minnesota. Scarcely a month later, having heard that she and her companions had left in spite of his objections, he returned to St. Marys to “restore order, and declare Mother Benedicta banished, once and for all, from St. Marys.” He observed that the sisters who remained there were very disturbed, especially “because she did not appoint a superior but only ordered Mother Theresia [Vogel] to look out for the others without presenting her to the convent as their superior. Those who remained, nuns and lay sisters (only one lay sister went along), were called traitors.” Aware that Abbot Wimmer accused her of leaving the women at St. Marys “without help and in the greatest confusion,” Benedicta later defended herself explaining: “That I did not forsake the sisters, but instead, desired to bring them help, is proven by my petitions to the Holy See. Before I left St. Marys, I promised that I would bring them help.”

Nepomucene Ludwig, who was among those left behind at St. Marys, remembered the situation there during the summer of 1857. Her recollection resembled Wimmer’s version of the story.

It is impossible to describe the thoughts and feelings of those who were left here. They were like children—homeless and abandoned. That is how they felt! Poverty, disorder and frustration stared them in the face. Vacation days were at hand and that meant no school, and therefore no income. . . . But the scheme to remove the Benedictines from St. Marys came to naught.
Before he left St. Marys on July 14, 1857, Boniface Wimmer had “put things in order,” fulfilling the reason for which he had come in the first place.

I confirmed *ad interim* Theresia [Vogel] as prioress, appointed Walburga [Dietrich] as subprioress, Edwarda [Redant] as novice mistress (unanimous, with the choir sisters whom I called to a Chapter which Fr. Prior, confessor, and I attended), entrusted the students to Mother Walburga, had the child removed from the convent, restored the choir and the daily order, with the restriction, however, that Matins be omitted because it is difficult for the teachers, brought along some money ($62 for the sale of chances at the fair) and then left. . . . The brothers and sisters were again in good order and mutually trusting.  \(^{350}\)

Ludwig remembered that soon, “in God’s good time, things went along favorably. The loveliness of peace returned with good order and the blessings from above.” One of the happy ironies she recalled pertained to the boxes of books and valuables that Benedicta and her companions had packed before their departure.

The men of St. Marys who hauled away the shipment of boxes of goods to the railroad station decided the amount of shipment was too much for them to handle, so they returned some of the boxes. God arranged it that one of these cases contained the precious melodeon, and there was joy in the hearts of the Sisters at St. Joseph’s Convent again. Two young persons with good vocal talents procured copies of chant Masses from Mr. Henry Luhr, the choir master, so that our chant Mass would not be dropped on the following Sunday.  \(^{351}\)

She went on to say that the Benedictine monks and the people of the area helped the depleted community of women at St. Marys to get back on its feet again. Abbot Wimmer sent one of his best professors from St. Vincent’s to St. Marys for a period of convalescence, during which time he was to give instructions to the sisters there. Ignatius Trueg, O.S.B., offered instruction in Latin, exegetics, and the translation of hymns, psalms and lessons of the breviary. In addition to chant and music, he also taught mathematics, composition, education and aesthetics. There commenced “a time in which zeal and earnestness were displayed again. The religious order of the day was strictly enforced, and studies of the useful, the beautiful and the true were pursued. . . .”  \(^{352}\)

Perhaps owing to selective memory, Nepomucene Ludwig ignored some of the very harsh realities that were part and parcel of life at St. Marys from 1857 to 1859. After Benedicta Riepp and her companions left, only fifteen out of the forty women who had
The Reshaping of a Tradition

comprised St. Joseph Convent in early 1856 remained. Twenty of the original forty women had become foundresses in Erie, Newark, and St. Cloud, three had died and two had returned to secular life. On the one hand, a community of fifteen members with two candidates awaiting investiture seemed strong enough to weather the challenges of survival. But within a year and a half the wounded community would lose another five women to death, and would suffer the transfer of one of their most capable members to Newark, NJ.

A clear sign that life would go on at St. Joseph Convent, St. Mary’s PA, was the investiture of Wendelin Riederer and Aloysia O’Brien on July 11, 1857, scarcely a month after the departure of Benedicta and her companions. Presumably, Boniface Wimmer presided at this ceremony before he left St. Mary’s to return to St. Vincent’s on July 14. This gain of two members was followed by the loss of two others before the close of 1857. Luitgarde Butsch had returned from Erie to St. Marys in January due to illness. “After her return to St. Marys her strength failed rapidly, but she lingered through the spring and summer only to die August 30, 1857, closing her religious life and career at the age of eighteen. . . . She anticipated her final profession by two months, having pronounced her perpetual vows on her deathbed.” Eleven days later, on September 10, Bernarda Weidenboerner died at the age of seventeen. She too was permitted to profess her final vows on her deathbed.

Early in 1858 the community experienced yet another youthful death. Eight days before she died, Adelaide Silber was allowed to profess her vows before the Prioress, Theresa Vogel, and her confessor, Aegidius Christoph, O.S.B. Her Latin vow document included the customary monastic formula, with the following annotation appended at the bottom of the document: “Let it be attested that the Venerable Mother Adelaide, on the sixth day of January, promised solemn vows on account of the imminent danger of death.”

Although the membership losses of 1857 and 1858 were a heavy blow to the women left behind, the year 1858 did not end without hope. On October 5, five new members were invested: Hildegarde Kohlhepp, Luitgard Schraudt, Rose Bastard, Itha (family name not preserved), and Ida Weigel. Unlike the extremely young ages of earlier candidates, the average age among this group of novices was twenty-five.
The year 1859 occasioned the investiture of two new candidates, the death of two more members, and the profession of five novices. And as the year closed, the basement of a new convent was being constructed. Boniface Wimmer had obtained 8,000 gulden from King Ludwig for the construction of a convent adjoining the parish church, a promised “palace in comparison to the wretched dwelling “which now housed them.”

Community Profile at the Close of 1859

The Roman Decree of 1859 marked the separation of the original American Motherhouse from its founding convent in Eichstatt. The cumulative experience of the community at St. Marys during the first seven years of its existence earned for it a unique and unprecedented place in the development of Benedictinism among women in North America. Affectionately called the “Cradle of the Order in the United States,” St. Joseph Convent gave birth to four new foundations within a span of three and a half years. In so doing, it sacrificed twenty-one of its original forty members to the four new communities, while grieving the loss of eight young women to death. The average age of the members who died was twenty-two.

At the close of 1859 the community at St. Marys numbered eighteen. The nine perpetually professed members were the only remaining women from the seminal group of forty. Walburga Dietrich held a unique position not only in the community at St. Marys, PA, but among all Benedictine women in America at the close of 1859. Besides being the oldest woman in the Order at age fifty-five, she was the only member of the original founding group from Eichstatt who spent the entire span of her first seven years in America in the wilderness clearing of Marienstadt.

There are several places in the relevant correspondence that point to Walburga’s frustration, and her clear desire to leave St. Marys. “Enclosed please find a letter of Mother Walburga Dietrich which she has written according to my advice, for she said she could not stand it here any longer and I, therefore, told her to write to you.” A month later Seidenbusch wrote to Wimmer again with a more specific message: “Mother Walburga
has declared herself ready to go to Indiana [PA]." Writing in July, Wimmer informed Mueller that when he presided at the ceremony of solemn profession at St. Marys, both Walburga and Emmerana Bader "reported to me at the same time that they would not and could not remain any longer, and they asked that I transfer them, for God's sake, to another place." That had been in March, and even now as he recalled her desperation, he had already appointed her subprioress at St. Marys, virtually removing any possibiltiy of her departure. In a later letter, Wimmer intimated that Walburga's problem at St. Marys had really been with Benedita Riepp and Willibalda Scherbauer, saying that Walburga was "strangely and entirely set to one side by these two." Perhaps Wimmer believed that Walburga would fare better at St. Marys after Benedicta and Willibalda were gone.

Little is known about the lives of the other eight perpetually professed women. Boniface Cassidy, Mechtild Richter, Placida Graber, and Adelberta Glatt had been members of the first novitiate group at St. Joseph Convent. Although their lives had remained relatively stable at St. Marys for six years, it would not be long before three of the four would be scattered to other convents. Xavier Lechner, Stanislaus Kostka Beyerle, Romana Bernhard and Theresa Vogel had been among the nine women who professed solemn vows on March 21, 1857. The early sources are mostly silent about the role of these women during the first seven years of St. Joseph Convent's existence. Theresa Vogel, however, was destined to become a very influential woman in the succeeding history of the community at St. Marys. At age twenty-three, and only three months professed, Abbot Wimmer chose her to be the superior of the community at the most critical moment in its early history. Her task as a leader was to "pick up the pieces" of a crumbling and demoralized community, less than a month after the departure of Benedicta Riepp and her companions in June of 1857. That she rose to the challenge heroically is evidenced by the fact that she served the community as prioress for a total of twenty-one years.

The above-named members comprised one-half of St. Joseph Convent at the close of 1859. The other half consisted of seven members who had professed first vows and two novices. All nine of them had entered the community between July 11, 1857, and March 21, 1859. They represented a kind of new community that
had not experienced the turbulent years from 1852–1857. Presumably, they had not even met the women who had become so controversial—Benedicta Riepp, Willibald Scherbauer, Emmerana Bader. It is interesting to note also that unlike the earliest candidates to enter at St. Marys, these tended to be older at the time of entrance. The average age among these nine women was twenty-seven.

Among the eighteen members who constituted St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, PA, at the time of their formal separation from St. Walburg’s in Eichstatt, the average age was twenty-eight. Of the seventeen women whose ethnic origin is known, ten were European-born and seven were born in the United States. Of the five foundations of Benedictine women in America in 1859, St. Joseph Convent had the highest percentage of American-born members, forty-one percent.

**An Order Transplanted and Taking Root**

The Roman Decree of 1859 effected an autonomous Order of Benedictine women in the New World. Objectively speaking, autonomy in a new land was a victory, clearly in keeping with an ancient charism. However, from the point of view of the women who had transplanted the tradition, the price paid for a bittersweet victory must have seemed immeasurably high. The relationship between the American convents and the European Motherhouse had become severely strained between 1857 and 1859. Threatened by the disapproval of the American Abbot, Boniface Wimmer, and the European hierarchy to whom she was subject, Prioress Edwarda Schnitzer of St. Walburg Convent in Eichstadt resorted to the closure of her convent to all American sisters. Already in 1858, she wrote the following in Chronik-Eichstadt:

I announced to the two Americans [Benedicta Riepp and Augustine Short], likewise in the presence of all the Chapter members, that no sister from America should expect hospitality with us again, and that we greatly desire that no further demands be made on our convent by the Americans, and that we, in fact desire to have nothing to do with America. 370
It becomes apparent in her later correspondence that Edwarda Schnitzer had written the above entry under great duress. In a letter to Scholastica Burkhard, Prioress of Erie, Edwarda acknowledged the impending Roman Decree and expressed “deep sadness” in view of its consequences.

The convents in America are separated from the Convent of St. Walburg, separated by the Holy See, so I cannot and dare not even call myself the mother of those whom I allowed to leave as my children. That is the will of God! . . . [do] not look upon it as though I, on my own impulse, had deserted my children; but what Catholic would not humbly and faithfully submit to Rome!\(^371\)

A later entry in Chronik-Eichstätt, evidenced Edwarda’s eventual change of heart.

The first convent of Benedictines founded from Eichstätt, as a result of the hasty separation from the motherhouse, had to overcome many difficulties. There were all manner of misunderstandings which the good sisters must have experienced as a heavy burden. The mission flower could open only among many thorns.\(^372\)

For many years Prioress Edwarda Schnitzer sustained a correspondence with Willibald Scherbauer in St. Joseph. Her letters are punctuated with poignant expressions of love for her “dear children in distant America.” As late as 1883 she wrote:

I again received . . . news about my dear children in distant America, where they are doing so much good for the glory of God and our holy Father Benedict and for the salvation of souls. They are all still very dear to my heart, are enclosed in my mother love and in all my prayers until we meet again united in the great family of our glorious Holy Father . . . Yes, I often think of you—how could a mother forget her child? . . . Always have I loved you and have always sincerely meant it well with you and to this day have this feeling toward you. In love and in prayer and in the true spirit of St. Benedict, which always and everywhere is the same spirit found in his wonderful Holy Rule, we will remain united till death even if lands and oceans separate us. I am happy that you still think with so much love of St. Walburg’s and of your former spiritual Mother.\(^373\)

By the time American Benedictine women were placed under episcopal jurisdiction and denied the privilege of professing solemn vows under the Decree of December 6, 1859, the Order had definitely taken root in North America, and was on the threshold of a period of rapid expansion and increase in membership. The total Order had a population of fifty-one members, twenty-three of whom were perpetually professed. Seventeen of these women
had professed their first vows, and eleven were novices. The Order was still predominantly European in ethnic origin. Seventy per cent, or thirty-six of the Order’s members were European-born, twelve were born in the United States, and one was born in Canada. The average age of all the members was twenty-seven.

St. Joseph Convent, in St. Marys, was the largest community with eighteen members. Eleven women were located in Erie, eight in Newark, ten in St. Cloud, and four in Covington. Four of the communities still had prioresses who had entered and been trained at St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt—Scholastica Burkhard of Erie, Emmerana Bader of Newark, Willibalda Scherbauer of St. Cloud, and Alexia Lechner of Covington. Although European-born, Theresa Vogel of St. Marys was the first to become a prioress among the women who had entered the Order in America. Clearly, by the time the planting period of Benedictine women in America drew to a close, the Order was already evidencing some fundamental innovations which were reshaping their ancient tradition in a New World.

Notes

1 Riepp to von Reisach, November 27, 1852. Girgen, pp. 23–24.
3 Riepp to Ludwig-Missionsverein, February 14, 1856. Girgen, p. 54.
4 McDonald, With Lamps Burning, p. 33.
5 Riepp to Barnabo, January 4, 1859. Girgen, pp. 135–137.
6 See chapter I, n. 112.
7 Girgen, p. 110. The precise nature of the conflict unfolds within the context of Erie’s story, pp. 93–114.
8 Riepp to Ludwig, January 8, 1853. Girgen, p. 27.
9 December 15, 1853. Girgen, p. 35.
12 May 21, 1855. Girgen, p. 47.
13 Riepp to Wimmer, May 3, 1857. LMA, Munich, original; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 20; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 66.


16 Burgemeister, p. 24.

17 Girgen, p. 51.

18 Morkin and Seigel, p. 69.


20 Schnitzer to Burkhard, November 15, 1859. MSBMA, original; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 33; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 153. This “written consent of Mother Benedicta,” in whatever form it may have been given, is not extant.

21 Exemption meant the removal of St. Vincent’s from the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Pittsburgh. Wimmer interpreted the exemption decision as Rome’s wish “to protect the Benedictine Order against the attacks of the bishop,” and to assure that “with the expansion into other dioceses, the common cooperation will not be disturbed through the influences of the bishops on the individual monasteries, either with regard to discipline or the goals the communities are to pursue.” Wimmer to Ludwig, August 19, 1855, and Wimmer to Kremsmünster, August 17, 1855, cited in Oetgen, *An American Abbot*, p. 118.

22 Ibid., pp. 117–118.

23 July 24, 1857. St. Boniface Abbey Archives (SBAA), Munich, original; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 26; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 87. In reality, the women believed themselves to be self-supporting, and appealed to the motherhouse in Eichstätt and the Ludwig-Missionsverein whenever additional funds were required. There is no extant evidence that Benedicta and her community ever appealed directly to Boniface Wimmer for financial assistance.

24 O’Connor to Wimmer, July 15, 1852. Girgen, p. 16.

25 The diocese of Pittsburgh was created in 1843 and Michael O’Connor became its first Bishop. At the First Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1852 the diocese of Pittsburgh was divided, creating the new diocese of Erie. Michael O’Connor then became the first Bishop of Erie until April 23, 1854, when he was transferred back to the see of Pittsburgh. Josue M. Young replaced him as Bishop of Erie, and remained there until his death in 1866.

26 von Oetztl to Young, October 6, 1855. Girgen, p. 53.

27 McDonald, p. 13.
30 *100th St. Marys*, n.p.; Morkin and Seigel, *Wind in the Wheat*, p. 73.
32 Baska, p. 44; Oetgen, p. 153; Girgen, p. 55.
33 April 9, 1859. Mathäser, pp. 115–124; Girgen, p. 145.
34 Oetgen, p. 153.
35 Morkin and Seigel, p. 82.
37 *Erie’s 75th*, p. 9; Morkin and Seigel, pp. 82–83.
38 Riepp to Garner, August 25, 1856. SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 16; Eng. trans., Girgen p. 56. In this letter Benedicta refers to her time in Erie as she writes from St. Marys.
44 See appendix 4 for biographical data.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 *100th St. Marys*, n.p.
48 Wimmer to Ludwig, April 9, 1859. Girgen, p. 145.
49 Wimmer to Abbot of Scheyern (Rupert Leiss, O.S.B.), February 25, 1859. SVAA, original; Eng. trans., Morkin and Seigel, pp. 103–105, and Girgen, pp. 139–140. It is interesting to note that Morkin and Seigel edited out of their translation Wimmer’s comment about Benedicta’s “spite.”
50 MSBMA, original; Eng. trans., Morkin and Seigel, p. 107, Girgen, p. 100. The current archivist of Mount Saint Benedict Monastery, Erie, PA, indicated that there are no extant letters or writings of their first superior, Scholastica Burkhard (in a letter sent to this author on December 9, 1986). Why her letters to Wimmer were not saved is one of the many mysteries of the role of the women in their own founding story. There are twelve extant letters of Wimmer to Burkhard, written between November 15, 1857, and December 31, 1880. In this first extant letter to
her there is already evidence of his willingness to confide in her, and a great concern and interest in the welfare of the community. The letters as a whole reveal a growing respect and admiration for her and trace the development of a friendship which endured until her death in 1881.

51 Morkin and Seigel, p. 85.
52 Baska, p. 24.
53 MSBMA, personal data records.
54 Morkin and Seigel, p. 85.
55 Ibid., p. 86. There is a discrepancy regarding the date of her death. The Catalogue of 1879 reports the date of her death on April 30, 1857.
56 Antonia (Margaret) Hermann and Dominica (Christine) Riederer. See appendix 5.
57 Morkin and Seigel, p. 102. What was entailed in the “opening” of a novitiate at this time is not known. The authors intimate that, as superior, Scholastica Burkhard exercised her prerogative in making this decision. However, it appears that from January of 1857 to January 17, 1858, when the first novices were invested, it was a novitiate without novices.
62 Ibid., p. 70.
63 In his letter to Mueller, the Court Chaplain of King Ludwig I, dated July 24, 1857, Wimmer reported that “the Superior and 13 sisters left St. Marys,” Girgen, p. 96. In another place Wimmer wrote: “... twelve wanted to go there according to the wish of the superior,” Wimmer to Oberkamp, September 18, 1857, Girgen, p. 107. A further complicating factor in discerning just how many left St. Marys with Benedicta revolves around the question of whether or not the two candidates and an orphan girl were counted among the “sisters.”
64 Catalogue, 1903, p. 7.
65 Morkin and Seigel, p. 317 and 124. It was the current archivist of Mount St. Benedict, Erie, PA, who first suggested at least the possibility of Alexia Lechner’s presence in the group left behind. In a letter to this author dated February 3, 1987, she writes: “Mother Benedicta and several sisters arrived in Erie enroute to Minnesota at the end of June, 1857. Seven sisters left for Minnesota but Sisters Benedicta and Augustine Short left Erie for Rome ... perhaps Alexia Lechner was with the group
[intending to go] to Minnesota but stayed in Erie. Records do not say who sent Maura Flieger or why she was sent to Erie." That Maura Flieger may also have been in the Minnesota-bound group but then left behind is suggested in a biting comment by Wimmer to Mueller in his letter of July 24, 1857: "There is, moreover, no sister who would not be satisfied and grateful . . . except Mother Benedicta, Mother Willibalda and the 'uncouth' Maura who was left behind so that we would have our cross!" (Girgen, p. 98) It is not clear from the context, however, whether she was left behind in Erie or St. Marys. Finally, the possibility of Salesia Haas' presence in the group left behind rests only on the fact of her having been assigned from Erie (Morkin and Seigel, p. 124) to the new foundation in Covington, KY. Precisely when and under what circumstances her transfer from St. Marys to Erie took place are not known, therefore leaving open the possibility of her presence in Erie from 1857 to 1859.

66 A parish approximately eight miles from St. Cloud. The pastor, Bruno Riess, O.S.B., had appealed to Wimmer for teaching sisters in letters dated April 1, 1857, and June 1, 1857. SJAA, cited by McDonald, n.10, p. 298.

67 Scherbauer to Wimmer. SVAA, original; SBCA, copy, P-Scherbauer; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 80.

68 August 20, 1857. SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 29; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 82. This is the only reference in the relevant correspondence that suggests Wimmer's plan to transfer Scholastica Burkhard to the Minnesota foundation as superior.


71 The story of their departure for Europe in July of 1857 belongs to a later section of this chapter. Boniface Wimmer claimed that they left without his permission, and resolved that they would not be welcomed upon their return. Reference to their return is appropriate here, since it was the apparent cause of strife within the Erie community from May to July of 1858.

72 June 1, 1858. MSBMA, original; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 37; Eng. trans., Girgen, pp. 127–128.


75 MSBMA. Personal data records state that she was “transferred to the Benedictine Sisters of Erie on May 6, 1858.” She was to remain there, however, for only six years, for she then “transferred her vows to Kansas, leaving January 12, 1866.” Twenty-three years later she was officially received into the community in Covington, KY, where she died in 1902. “Chronik der Inwohnerinnen des Klosters St. Walburga, Covington, Kentucky, 1863-1912.” Eng. trans. by Julia Koenig, p. 15. SWMA.


78 November 23, 1857. Girgen, p. 120.

79 Girgen, p. 128. Whether Augustine Short was ever really accepted within the community at Erie during her stay there until 1866 is questionable. In an April 25, 1860, letter to Scholastica Burkhard, Wimmer writes: “If Sister Augustine, in a letter to Fr. Prior, would state exactly all circumstances of her illness, I hope he’ll be able to cure her.” MSBMA, original; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 46; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 161. The circumstances of her “illness” and her eventual transfer to Atchison, KS, are not known.

80 Girgen, p. 139. The letter goes on to report that he had obtained the legal ownership of their land in Erie and had turned it over to their use “in trust.”

81 Oetgen, An American Abbot, p. 137.

82 MSBMA, original; Eng. trans., Morkin and Seigel, p. 121-122.

83 SVAA, original; SWMA, copy.

84 The Challenge, n. p.

85 MSBMA, copy of an Eng. trans. of the entire letter of March 7, 1859, by Gertrude Schmitz, O.S.B. Morkin and Seigel omitted this portion of it on pp. 120-123, without the use of an elipsis.

86 See appendix 4 for biographical data.

87 The Challenge, n.p. Although Kentucky allied itself with the Union when the Civil War broke out in 1861, it was so near to the dividing line that it became the stamping ground for both Northern and Southern armies. Soldiers often encamped a block or so from the convent in Covington.

88 MSBMA, personal data sheet.

89 January 23, 1860. MSBMA, copy of an Eng. trans. by Gertrude Schmitz, O.S.B. Morkin and Seigel included a translation of this letter on pp. 117-119, but edited out, “we’ll see if a wedding will soon take place.”
The story of Newark's founding in 1857 will be detailed in the next section of this chapter, as well as the story of Emmerana Bader's role in it.


MSBMA, cited in Campbell, p. 10.


In a November 15, 1859, letter to Scholastica, Edwarda asked her if she had received her last letter. "It was the answer to your letter to me which you wrote a short time after the return of Mother Benedicta." Girgen, p. 154.


Ibid.

This was the decree eventually sent to America, dated December 6, 1859. See appendix 3.


Ibid.

MSBMA, original. A portion of this letter was translated into English and published in Morkin and Seigel, pp. 117–119. Upon comparison with a copy of the original and an English translation by Gertrude Schmitz, O.S.B., sent to this author by the archivist of MSBMA, it was discovered that several controversial portions were omitted by Morkin and Seigel, who failed to signal these omissions with an ellipsis. The excerpt quoted here is one of the omissions.

September 7, 1870. MSBMA, original; Eng. trans. by Gertrude Schmitz, O.S.B.

Ibid.

See appendix 5.


105 Campbell, A Love That Impels, p. 1.

106 Girgen, pp. 54–55. The second letter was addressed to Mr. Garner, from whom she was requesting financial assistance for the purchase of a melodeon, and bears no relevance to the community situation at St. Marys in 1856. Girgen, p. 56.

107 July 24, 1857. Girgen, p. 89.

108 Ibid., pp. 89–90.

109 See chapter II, n.44. Stephanie Campbell, author of A Love That Impels, comments thus on the memoirs and its author: “An eyewitness of the conditions at St. Marys in its earliest years is the source for the inauspicious origins of the Ridgely [formerly Newark] community. And since that eyewitness was herself a contemporary of the founding prioress [Emmerana Bader] at Newark and was subsequently chosen to succeed her, the facts in the sequence of events can hardly be disputed, even allowing for selective memory” (p.1).

110 Girgen, p.89. Nearly two years later, when writing to King Ludwig, he repeated the same appraisal of the situation at St. Marys after Scholastica Burkhard’s departure to Erie. Willibalda, he wrote, “could not successfully fill the position [of novice mistress]. The novices were neglected; the candidates and young ladies received no further instruction. Benedicta and Willibalda did only what pleased them. The other older sisters, who were concerned about this, were persecuted and oppressed in every way; cliques arose in the convent. Even women of the town were drawn into the gossiping and great scandal was given.” April 9, 1859. Girgen, pp. 145–146.

111 Girgen, p. 90.

112 MEMOIRS, p. 6.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid., p. 7.

115 Ibid., p. 8.

116 If the dying sister referred to here was Baptista Mayer, who died on December 8, 1856, then Emmerana had registered her complaint at least three months prior to Wimmer’s announcement of her departure for Indiana, PA.
The status of the vows of American sisters had been in question for several decades before the 1850’s. More precisely, whether the vows of American sisters should be solemn or simple (given the degree to which enclosure could be kept) came to be the subject of dialogue between the American bishops and Rome from October of 1857 until a final decision was reached by the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars in 1864. The decision arrived at required that all sisters in America take simple vows. Mary Ewens, O.P., *The Role of the Nun in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), p. 110–113; 202.


118 Konstitutionen, pp. 82–84.


120 November 23, 1857. Girgen, p. 121.

121 Girgen, p. 90.

122 Girgen, p. 121.

123 Girgen, p. 90.

124 The current archivist at St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, PA, believes that Wimmer chose all nine of the candidates for solemn profession on March 21, 1857. In a letter sent to Vivian Ivantic, O.S.B., current archivist of St. Scholastica Priory, Chicago, dated February 13, 1979, she wrote: “There were at least twenty-five sisters in the group from which Abbot Wimmer chose nine to make solemn vows. Many of the other sisters had been in the community longer than Sister Nepomucene [for instance].” SSPA

125 This list is based on data received from SJMA, March 30, 1987. cf. Ludwig, MEMOIRS, p. 7.

126 Catalogue, p. 8.

127 MEMOIRS, p. 7.

128 SJMA

129 MEMOIRS, p. 8.


131 Ibid., p. 91. See also Ludwig, MEMOIRS, p. 8.

132 Ibid.

133 Ibid.

134 Ibid.


136 MEMOIRS, p. 8. Note the discrepancy between Ludwig’s date of departure and Wimmer’s reported date of arrival in Indiana, PA. See also Campbell, *A Love That Impels*, p. 37.

137 MEMOIRS, p. 8.

Jerome Oetgen, in An American Abbot, p. 155, follows this interpretation.

The author of the 1903 Catalogue, p. 8, and Regina Baska, p. 68, follow the suggestion that the Indiana, PA, foundation “proved unsuitable.”

Campbell, A Love That Impels, p. 4, 37.


There is a discrepancy regarding the official date of Newark’s founding. Baska, p. 68, gives July 27, 1857, as the date of arrival, and Oetgen, p. 156, reports that Wimmer himself escorted the sisters to Newark in mid-July. The German and English Registers in the archives of the Newark community give July 2 as the date of arrival, “a date which has been celebrated as Founders’ Day even to the present.” Campbell, p. 5.


Matrikal des St. Scholasticas Kloster in Newark, N.J. von Gründung desselben in Jahre, 1857. SGMA. Hereafter cited as the German Register. Baska, p. 68, and Morkin and Seigel, p. 93, accept the interpretation that Benedicta Riepp, herself, sent the sisters to Newark.

Campbell, A Love that Impels, p. 41.


Oetgen, pp. 134–135. See also Wimmer to Oberkamp, September 18, 1857. Girgen, p. 106.

For biographical data see appendix 4.

Girgen, p. 105.

Girgen, p. 121, 105.

MEMOIRS, p. 10.

Campbell, A Love that Impels, p. 40.

Matthäser, p. 96, n.1; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 108.

April 9, 1859. Girgen, p. 149.

MSBMA, original; English translation by Gertrude Schmitz, O.S.B.; originally printed in Morkin and Seigel, pp. 117–119. See also, Campbell, p. 39 and 10.

Girgen, p. 161.

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159 Ibid.
160 SGMA
161 SGMA, p. 3. Data from SJMA suggests that Adelgunda Leschall professed final vows on January 19, 1858, in Newark.
162 MEMOIRS, p. 10.
163 See Morkin and Seigel, pp. 113–117 for the full text of the letter. The letter not only provides insight into Wimmer’s concept of vocation and his fiery disapproval of defection from vowed life, but also sheds light on the situation of anguish in which this young woman found herself. SVAA, original; MSBMA, copy; Eng. trans. by Gertrude Schmitz, O.S.B.
164 MEMOIRS, p. 2 and p. 8.
165 SGMA, p. 3.
166 MSBPA, original; Eng. trans. by Gertrude Schmitz, O.S.B.
167 SGMA
168 Document of Final Profession, SGMA.
169 Document of First Profession, SGMA. This short-lived practice of vowing will be discussed in the analysis of “Benedictine Vowing” in chapter V.
170 German Register, SGMA, p. 3.
171 Campbell, A Love That Impels, pp. 43–44.
172 Ludwig, MEMOIRS, p. 8.
174 Campbell, A Love That Impels, pp. 40–42. When Scholastica Mack and Meinrada Massenhauser professed their final vows on August 7, 1862, their documents named Adelberta Glatt as prioress.
175 MEMOIRS, p. 10.
176 See appendix 8 and 9. Appendix 9 is adapted from Stephanie Campbell, A Love That Impels, following p. 35.
178 William B. Mitchell, History of Stearns County, Minnesota (Chicago: H.C. Cooper, Jr., and Co., 1915), vol. I, p. 280. When the community moved from St. Cloud to St. Joseph, MN, in November of 1863, the convent was renamed “St. Benedict’s Convent,” and remains so-named until the present day.
180 Benedictine monks first arrived in St. Cloud, MN, on May 20, 1856, from St. Vincent’s Monastery in Latrobe, PA. Under the leadership of
Prior Demetrius di Marogna, the community established St. Cloud's first parish in July 1856, with Cornelius Wittmann serving as first pastor. On August 15, 1856, Bruno Riess became the first pastor of a mission parish at St. Joseph, a small settlement of German immigrants approximately eight miles from St. Cloud. On December 8 of the same year, Cornelius Wittmann opened St. Cloud's first school in a small frame building owned by John Edelbrock. "It was a parish elementary school which at the same time inaugurated free public education in central Minnesota. . . ." The second such school was established in St. Joseph by Bruno Riess shortly thereafter. "The Benedictine missionaries of Minnesota followed this pattern for years: The first pastor was the first schoolteacher, and as the parish developed a man teacher was employed, in the German tradition, for the District School, which was usually built near the church. . . ." (pp. 46-47). The introduction of teaching sisters into schools of this type was to become a serious problem for the new women's community in St. Cloud. Colman J. Barry, O.S.B., Worship and Work, pp. 32-47. See also Idelia Loso, St. Joseph: Preserving a Heritage (St. Cloud, MN: Sentinel Printing Company, Inc., 1989), chapter 3.

181 March 10, 1857. SJAA, original; Eng. trans., Girgen, pp. 60-61.

182 April 1, 1857. SJAA, original; cited by Grace McDonald in With Lamps Burning, p. 15, n. 10.

183 This letter is not extant. That it existed is attested to in a letter written by Benedicta Riepp to the Ludwig-Missionsverein on April 13, 1857: "On Holy Saturday when I received the bill of exchange [from the Ludwig-Missionsverein], I also received a letter from Minnesota written by the Prior of the Benedictines asking for sisters for two stations to which at least six or eight sisters must be sent." LMA, original; SBCA, copy, Box 2:1-1-1, f. 18; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 61.


185 Girgen, p. 61.

186 SVAA, original; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 19; Eng. trans., Girgen, pp. 63-64.

187 Perhaps it was this monk at St. Marys to whom Seidenbusch referred in the above letter when he said: "They were stopped by some person's advice."

188 Girgen, p. 62.

189 Ibid., pp. 62–63.

190 Seidenbusch to Wimmer, April 24, 1857. Girgen. p. 64.

191 Girgen, pp. 65–66.

192 Seidenbusch to Wimmer. SVAA, original, SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 21.
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193 It is important to note here that mail delivery out of St. Marys, PA, was extremely slow. In her letter to the Ludwig-Missionverein on April 13, Benedicta Riepp observed that it took “at least fourteen days for letters to go to and from Erie” (Girgen, p. 63). In view of this, the time lapses were surely lengthy to and from St. Cloud to Latrobe and St. Marys, PA (di Marogna and Riess to Wimmer and Riepp), and from St. Marys, PA, to Latrobe, and Newark, NJ (Riepp and Seidenbusch to Wimmer). As far as can be determined, at least eleven letters, written between April 1 and June 15, transpired between the six people directly involved in the Minnesota “project.” Five of these letters are not extant, but that they existed can be determined from references made to them in the other letters.


196 Ibid.

197 di Marogna to Wimmer, June 15, 1857. Girgen, p. 68. Benedicta’s letter is not extant, but Prior Demetrius quoted her directly in this letter to Wimmer.

198 Ibid.


200 “The customary route of travel to the West for those encumbered by luggage was rail and wagon to Pittsburgh and thence by boat down the Ohio River to the Mississippi. Although records are lacking, one can assume that the nuns followed the same route as did the Benedictine monks the previous summer, for it was the common one of the day” (Grace McDonald, With Lamps Burning, pp. 20-21). This author goes on to report that such a trip from Pittsburgh to St. Louis took approximately twelve or thirteen days, and to travel from St. Louis to St. Paul took about four days. The sisters arrived in St. Paul on a “late June day in 1857,” and were stranded there for about a week. On July 2 they left St. Paul, docked in St. Cloud on July 3, and disembarked on July 4 (pp. 21–24).


202 Wimmer to Mueller, July 24, 1857. Girgen, p. 97. See also, Girgen, pp. 71, 76, 97, 100 and 146. Recently checked data indicates that Maura Flieger arrived in Erie on August 6, 1857, approximately two months after the departure of this group from St. Marys. MSBMA.

203 MEMOIRS, p. 8–9.

April 9, 1859. Girgen, p. 146.


That they arrived in St. Paul, MN, before June 28, is clear from di Marogna’s July 14, 1857, letter to Wimmer: “When I and Fr. Cornelius [Wittman] arrived at midnight of the 28th [June] in St. Paul . . . we were welcomed with not a little surprise by the announcement ‘The sisters have arrived and are lodged at the hospital’.” Girgen, p. 71.

Young to Wimmer, July 4, 1857. Girgen, p. 70; Scherbauer to Wimmer, August 18, 1857. Girgen, p. 80; di Marogna to Wimmer, August 20, 1857. Girgen, p. 82.

Young to Wimmer, July 4, 1857. Girgen, p. 69. One source adds that an additional goal was to “secure a revision of the statutes.” Baska, p. 38.

von Oettl to Mueller, n.d. LMA, original; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 30; Eng. trans., Girgen, pp. 103–104. Benedicta’s letter to which he refers is not extant.

See Riepp’s Points of Difference. LMA, original; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 34; Eng. Trans., Girgen, pp. 110–113; See also Barnabo to Wimmer, March 17, 1858. UNDA, Prop. Fide, Fol. 171 rv.; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-2, f. 3; Eng. trans., Girgen, pp. 109–110. It is outside the scope of this chapter to detail here the story of Benedicta Riepp’s negotiations in Europe. For the collected extant correspondence in this debate see Incarnata Girgen, Behind the Beginnings, chapter V, “Mother Benedicta Riepp in Europe,” pp. 102–125. For secondary accounts of this phase of the struggle between Riepp and Wimmer, see Baska, pp. 38–39; McDonald, pp. 16–19; Morkin and Seigel, pp. 9–93; Oetgen, An American Abbot, pp. 162–166. Refer to the opening of this chapter for a summary of the “Points of Difference.”


Young to Wimmer, July 4, 1857. Girgen, pp. 69–70.

Ibid., p. 70.


According to McDonald, in With Lamps Burning, Prior Demetrius di Marogna arrived in St. Paul on the third day after the sisters’ arrival (p.23). Writing to Wimmer on July 14, 1857, di Marogna reported that he arrived in St. Paul at midnight on June 28 (Girgen, p. 71). Therefore, the sisters’ arrival date could have been June 26. Nepomucene Ludwig, in her memoirs, stated that they arrived in St. Paul on June 27 (p. 9).

McDonald, p. 23.

Borgerding, p. 1. Unfortunately, there are no extant letters to verify any correspondence between Benedicta Riepp and Bishop Cretin.


This is a puzzling statement, since he had received Benedicta’s letter on June 14, the letter in which she informed him of Wimmer’s approval of the journey, and their expected arrival toward the end of June or early July (see Girgen, p. 68). A possible explanation for his surprise is that he had written to Wimmer the day after he received Benedicta’s letter, asking the Abbot to delay their coming. He may have presumed that Wimmer received his message on time, and therefore did not go ahead with preparations for the imminent arrival of Benedictine women in St. Cloud.


August 18, 1857. SVAA, original; SBCA, copy, P; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 77.

Ibid., pp. 77–78.

McDonald, p. 28.

Sherbauer to Wimmer, August 18, 1857. Girgen, p. 78.

McDonald, p. 28. The German Catholics in St. Cloud were divided on the school issue. As early as March 10, 1857, di Marogna described the situation to Wimmer: “In St. Cloud there are two factions; the one would like to hire a German teacher from Cumberland with whom they are corresponding. He is supposed to be the principal of the public school to be opened here, which at the same time is to be Catholic. Two incompatible ideas! Moreover, this school would be withdrawn from my supervision and direction—a thing to which I could never subscribe. . . . The other faction wants nothing to do with this public school, and rightly prefers the sisters. Financial considerations may be the bugbear in both factions” (Girgen, p. 60). By the time the sisters arrived in St. Cloud, the public school faction favoring lay teachers had won out, and a layman was already under contract for the school. Consequently, there was no parochial school in which the sisters could teach.

McDonald, p. 29.


Sherbauer to Wimmer, August 18, 1857. Girgen, p. 78.

Ibid., pp. 78–79.

Ibid.

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See appendix 4 for biographical data.


McDonald, p. 299, n. 1.


Wimmer to Oberkamp, November 23, 1857. Girgen, p. 121; Wimmer to Ludwig, April 9, 1859. Girgen, p. 147. The English translations are Girgen’s and perhaps of questionable nuance.


August 12, 1857. Girgen, p. 76.

Wimmer to Ludwig, April 9, 1859. Girgen, p. 148.


August [18] and 19, 1857. Girgen, p. 79. Nowhere in the extant correspondence is Willibalda’s great failing identified by Wimmer. It appears that his intense anger toward her was cumulative, and always related to the fact that neither she nor Benedicta were ever willing to grant him unlimited authority over the women’s communities.

Ibid., pp. 79–80.

Ibid., p. 80.

Ibid., p. 81.

Scherbauer to Wimmer, August 27, 1857. SVAA, original; SBCA, copy, 1:5-1-1, f. 1. In the body of the letter she reminded him: “It is true, I did beg you in a letter to permit me to come here, but Reverend Father, you gave me no answer, neither written or spoken” (p. 83). A postscript added to the letter read: “Do not close your heart, I beg; remember that you are a father. I wrote two letters to St. Marys and one to Erie, but have not received any answers” (Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 84).

Ibid., p. 83.


Wimmer to Burkhard, November 15, 1857. MSBMA, original; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 33; Eng. trans. by Gertrude Schmitz, O.S.B., Morkin and Seigel, pp. 106–107; reprinted in Girgen, pp. 99–100. See also Wimmer to Oberkamp, November 23, 1857: “After Sister Willibalda and
the rest of the sisters humbly apologized and urgently begged that I again take them on as my children and consider them in the same way as I do the rest of the Sisters in St. Marys, Erie, and Newark, I appointed [ich habe eingesetzt]Sister Willibalda as prioress [Priorin], because someone must be superior there” (Girgen, p. 116). Reflecting back on this visit in a later letter to King Ludwig, Wimmer reported that he had also forbade the community to receive novices (April 9, 1859. Girgen, p. 147).

259 Mueller to Wimmer, March 15, 1859. Mathäser, pp. 115–116, n. 1; English translation, Girgen, p. 140. Willibalda’s letter is not extant. See McDonald, pp. 44–48 for a concise account of this story.
260 Ibid., p. 141.
262 Wimmer to Ludwig, April 9, 1859. Girgen, pp. 147–148.
266 di Marogna to Wimmer, August 12, 1857. Girgen, p. 74.
267 The St. Cloud Democrat, December 9, 1858, quoted by McDonald, p. 37.
268 Ibid., June 30, 1859, and July 21, 1859, quoted by McDonald, pp. 39–40.
269 Ibid., September 26, 1861, quoted by McDonald, p. 41; cf. Girgen, p. 165. McDonald speculated about Jane Swisshelm’s unusual interest in the Benedictine women as follows: “The friendship of this fiery woman suffragist and abolitionist, who was, moreover, a strong Calvinist, with the cloistered nuns is hard to explain. On the surface they had nothing in common except their sex and a Pennsylvania German background. But perhaps courageous loyalty to ideals was the bond of mutual admiration.” With Lamps Burning, p. 41.
270 Girgen, p. 85.
272 Girgen, p. 84.
273 Ibid., p. 85. Time proved Evangelista wrong about her perceived lack of leadership ability. Chosen to be the superior of the group that began a new foundation in Atchison, KS, in 1863, she remained the superior of that community until 1884. In addition, she was elected the first

275 In view of Gregoria Moser’s tender age of entrance into the convent (17), it is interesting to note that she was the second last to die of the original founding group of forty women at St. Marys, PA. She died in Atchison, KS, on February 4, 1923, at the age of eighty-six. Schuster, p. 40.

277 Entrants Record: 1852–1891, SBCA.
278 Personal data file, SBCA, original. The document omitted the date and the name of a presiding prelate, and reveals some confusion about the name of the community at the time. Above the designation of “St. Cloud” in the document, the name “Scholastica” was written in as an addition. In another place, the early name of the convent was given as “St. Joseph.” Baska, p. 78.

279 Wimmer to Burkhard, November 15, 1857. Girgen, p. 100.
280 For biographical data see appendix 10.
281 di Marogna to Wimmer, August 12, 1857. Girgen, p. 74. Wimmer’s letter is not extant.
282 Ibid.
284 Ibid.
285 di Marogna to Wimmer, August 12, 1857. Girgen, p. 74
286 Ibid., pp. 74–75.
288 Entrants Record: 1852–1891, SBCA. Evangelista Kremmeter, writing to Wimmer on August 22, 1857, noted that Marianne Wolters was a teacher of English and music (Girgen, p. 85). She did not mention, however, the work that Prisca Meier performed in the community. Both of these women eventually became members of the founding group in Atchison in 1863. There, Amanda Meier became the subprioress and novice mistress, while Ehrentrude Wolters became an accomplished teacher of music until she left the convent in 1866. The chronicle of the Atchison community reported that some time during the school year of 1866–1867, Ehrentrude “found an excuse to go East on business, accompanied by Lena Northman as far as St. Louis, laid off her religious dress, and returned to the world” (quoted by Schuster, p. 47). Another source
reports the following: "Tradition has it that she later joined with another former nun from the East and taught school in Long Prairie, Minnesota" (McDonald, p. 20, n. 1).

289 di Marogna to Wimmer, July 14, 1857. Girgen, p. 71. Variant spellings of her family name occur in the correspondence of the time—Leaschell, Leshall, Lejal. Lejal is the spelling preferred in the records of Mount St. Scholastica Convent, Atchison, the community to which Adelaide (Josephine) eventually belonged as one of its founding members.

290 Entrants Record: 1852–1891, SBCA.


293 Wimmer to Burkhard, November 15, 1857. Girgen, p. 100.


295 Entrants Record: 1852–1891, SBCA. In 1866 or 1867, Adelaide Lejal left the Atchison community. About both she and Ehrentrude Wolters, Atchison’s centennial historian wrote the following: “It was said that either one or both were musicians who played for the public at the convent’s first reception of the mayor and Atchison citizens and that one or both heard comments on their ‘wasting their talents in a convent.’ A letter in the Abbey Archives from a brother of Sister Adelaide asks Prior Augustine to help her return to the convent since she is ‘so young,’ and oral tradition is that she led an exemplary life in works of Christian charity.” The author then makes a final, rather curious judgment about them: “Both of them spoke English a little better than the others and somehow allowed themselves to drift apart from the group” (Schuster, p. 41). A note added after her name and biographical information in the Entrants Record (SBCA) states that she “left the convent and married despite vows.”

296 Roetzer to Wimmer, August 20, 1857. Girgen, p. 76. See also McDonald, pp. 27–36.

297 di Marogna to Wimmer, August 20, 1857. Girgen, p. 82.

298 Wimmer to Burkhard, November 15, 1857. Girgen, p. 100.


300 McDonald, pp. 36–39.

301 For the full text of these letters in English translation, see Girgen, pp. 86–129.


303 October 20, 1858. Girgen, p. 131.

It is commonly believed that Benedicta Riepp died of tuberculosis on March 15, 1862. The only record of the death of the American foundress is the obituary published in the *St. Cloud Democrat* on March 20, 1862: “The Mother Superior of the Sisters of the Benedictine Order died at the convent in this place on last Saturday morning. She was buried the next forenoon with the usual service and rites of the Roman Catholic Church. The funeral was largely attended.” Quoted in Baska, p. 83, n. 32.

In a letter to King Ludwig, dated April 9, 1859, Wimmer referred to Benedicta Riepp as the “de facto superior of the St. Cloud house, and described Willibalda Scherbauer as the superior “by right” (Girgen, p. 145). What this distinction meant in the daily lives of the sisters is simply not discernible. Girgen asserts that “Mother Benedicta Riepp was not de facto superior; she was a member of the St. Cloud convent” (p. 145, n. 8). When Wimmer wrote to King Ludwig approximately a year later, he commented again on the place of Benedicta Riepp in the St. Cloud community: “About the convent in St. Cloud there is not a word, although in my report to Rome I had mentioned that Mother Benedicta was there. This silence speaks loudly enough, especially since it is known in Rome that Mother Benedicta considers herself superior there” (February 22, 1860. Mathäser, pp. 134-135; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 158). Girgen, rarely given to interpretation in her collection of translated letters, footnotes this comment by Wimmer as follows: “Indications are that Mother Benedicta Riepp accepted Mother Willibalda Scherbauer as superior in St. Cloud. Mother Willibalda had been appointed first by Mother Benedicta and then by Abbot Wimmer in 1857 and remained in office until Abbot Rupert Seidenbusch deposed her in 1868” (p. 158, n. 22).

Benedicta’s first reference to impaired health appeared in her only extant letter to Wimmer on May 3, 1857 (Girgen, p. 66). The only other extant reference to her health appeared in her letter to a “Reverend Father,” presumably her confessor in St. Cloud, written on December 30, 1861: “With a weak hand I would like to write you a few lines. . . .” She
closed the letter stating, “I feel too weak to write more” (SBCA, copy. 2:1-1-1, f. 48; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 166).

Accompanying the Roman Decree of separation and jurisdiction dated December 6, 1859, was a “Rescript” addressed to Bishop Young of Erie. It read, in part, as follows: “Your Grace already knows the way of life of the holy virgin Benedicta Riepp, professed in the monastery of Eichstätt of the Order of St. Benedict, and the discontent which she arouses in those convents erected by Abbot Wimmer and also the necessity of making provisions as soon as possible that no greater division follow. Desiring to offset these, His Holiness, Pope Pius IX, commands that she return to her own monastery of Eichstätt, and so commissions you, with that prudence with which you are eminently endowed, to communicate this to the aforesaid abbot as well as to the nun named above, and that you urge the execution of the pontifical request, taking care that due caution be preserved on the journey” (UNDA, Prop. Fide, Fol. 1073; SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 44; Eng. trans., Girgen, pp. 156–157). At this time, Benedicta Riepp was no longer under the jurisdiction of Bishop Young since she was living in St. Cloud. Therefore, the enforcement of the Rescript fell upon Bishop Thomas Grace of St. Paul. On January 28, 1861, Bishop Young sent a copy of the rescript to Bishop Grace with the following comment: “I presume, should you procure the intervention of Abbot Wimmer with the congregation of Bishops and Regulars, there would be no trouble about permitting Sister Benedicta to finish her days in Minnesota. Such appears, at least, to be the opinion of the Rev. fathers here” (SBCA, copy, 2:1-1-1, f. 47; Eng. trans., Grigen, pp. 162–163). Because of this intervention by the bishops of Erie and St. Paul, Benedicta Riepp was allowed to remain in St. Cloud.


Ibid.


Girgen, p. 136.

March 15, 1859. Girgen, p. 141.

See Girgen, pp. 141–152.

Mueller to Wimmer, June 1, 1859. Girgen, p. 151.


McDonald states that Bishop Grace “admitted two young women to the community” (p. 47). The author’s source is not cited here. The Entrants Record: 1852–1891 (SBCA), and Borgerding’s chronicle (SBCA, p. 5) verify the reception of three candidates into the novitiate on September 28, 1859—Antonia (Catherine) Streitz, Boniface (Paula) Bantle, and Bernarda (Philomene) Auge. See appendix 10.
200

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327 "Trip to the Red River Valley, 1861." St. Paul Seminary, original; cited in McDonald, p. 47, n. 5.

328 Genga to Young, Decree, December 6, 1859. UNDA, Prop. Fide, Fol. 1072; SBCA, copy. 2:1-1-1, f. 44; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 156; see appendix 3.


330 Proposals, July 11, 1858. SVAA, original; summarized in McDonald, p. 18, and Girgen, p. 122.


332 Wimmer to Lang, July 27, 1858. Girgen, p. 129.


336 McDonald, p. 47. There is a discrepancy here between this author's reference to Bishop Grace's reception of the vows of "four other members" during his second visit to St. Cloud, and the dates of investiture and profession as they have been preserved in the archives of St. Benedict's Convent. According to the Entrants Record: 1852–1891, only two women professed vows on September 29, 1861: Boniface (Paula) Bantle, and Bernarda (Philomene) Auge. Two other women became novices on the same day: Dominica (Cecilia) Massoth and Adelaide (Josephine) Lejal.


338 April 15, 1865. Mathäther, p. 164; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 182.


340 SVAA, original; SBCA copy; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 185. A formal decree of canonical erection of the St. Cloud/St. Joseph foundation was not pursued until after the turn of the century. On March 5, 1923, Joseph Francis Busch, Bishop of St. Cloud, decreed that "although the formal decree of the canonical erection of this Congregation does not exist, nevertheless through examination of candidates, through reception and profession of novices, through episcopal visitation, it therefrom always existed virtually approved from the time of its foundation." SBCA, original, 1:2-1-1, f. 2; Eng. trans. from the Latin by Irma Schumacher, O.S.B.

341 See appendix 10 and 11. Appendix 11 is adapted and updated from Upon This Tradition (1975).

342 McDonald, With Lamps Burning, Preface.

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346 Ludwig, MEMOIRS, p. 8.
348 Riepp to Barnabo, January 4, 1859. Girgen, p. 137.
349 MEMOIRS, p. 9.
351 MEMOIRS, p. 9.
352 Ibid.
353 The fifteen women were Walburga Dietrich, Mechtild Richter, Placida Graber, Boniface Cassidy, Edwarda Redant, Luitgarde Butsch, Bernarda Weidenboerner, Lidwina Uhl, Xavier Lechner, Stanislaus Kostka Beyerle, Adelberta Glatt, Theresa Vogel, Adelaide Silber, Nepomucene Ludwig, and Romana Bernhard.
354 Personal data records, SJMA.
355 Morkin and Seigel, p. 86.
356 100th St. Marys, n. p.
357 SJMA, original. Adelaide was seventeen years of age. The year 1858 also witnessed the temporary transfer of Nepomucene Ludwig from St. Marys to Newark.
358 Personal data records, SJMA. See appendix 12.
359 Ibid. The two women who died were Ludwina Uhl and Edwarda Redant. See appendix 4.
361 Catalogue, 1903, p. 9. The community moved into the new convent on December 21, 1860.
362 See appendix 12 and 13. Appendix 13 is adapted from Upon This Tradition (1975) and Sutera, True Daughters (1987).
363 Seidenbusch to Wimmer, April 24, 1857. Girgen, pp. 63–64.
366 Ibid., p. 96.
368 Adelberta Glatt was transferred to Newark, NJ, in 1860, Mechtild Richter to Shakopee, MN, in 1862, and Placida Graber to Elizabeth, NJ, in 1865. Personal data records, SJMA.
100th St. Marys, n. p. She served as Prioress from 1857–1875, and 1878–1881.

370 SWAA, original; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 125.


372 SWAA, original; Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 162.

373 October 25, 1883. SBCA, original, P-W; Eng. trans. by Incarnata Girgen, O.S.B.
Benedictine women in America kept pace with the phenomenal growth of American Catholic sisterhoods during the period from 1850–1900. During that period the number of vowed women religious in the United States increased from 1,344 in 1850 to 40,340 by 1900.¹ For nearly every Order of this expansion era, the general founding pattern had been the same. In order to respond to the urgent needs of millions of immigrants pouring into the country, the church in America looked to Europe for help. Each new community that arrived faced the inevitable "cycle of bewilderment at American customs, efforts to cope with the language, and problems with clerics and motherhouse officials over adaptation of their rule to the new situations they were encountering."²

By the time Benedictine women came upon the American scene in 1852, other Orders of women religious founded between 1790 and 1850 were already moving into the expansion period of their histories, a fact which probably accounts for the brevity of the foundation period for Benedictine women. For by 1859, as established in the preceding chapter, Bavarian Benedictine women were already officially separated from the Eichstätt motherhouse and the expansion period of their history was about to commence.
The pattern of founding new convents destined for independence from their respective motherhouses, a pattern unique to the Benedictine charism and already manifesting itself in the American experience between 1856 and 1859, continued well into and beyond the expansion period delineated for the purposes of this study. In addition to the five houses founded before the Roman Decree of 1859, ten more were independently established by the close of 1879. Within twenty years of the Decree, the total membership of the Order increased from 51 to 415 women, serving approximately 6,000 children in schools and orphanages.³

The dynamic of reshaping an ancient tradition in New World circumstances was at work in the expansion process itself. Typically, upon the arrival of Benedictine monks in a new parish, the call would go out to establish convents for sisters to settle in the vicinity of the newly established community of men. More often than not, the sisters responded enthusiastically to these requests, and left their motherhouses to establish new “missions,” some of which were destined to become independent foundations.

The pattern of journey, arrival and adaptation was nearly always the same. Travel from place to place was often arduous, and frequently made without the help promised them by those who had asked them to come. Almost immediately upon their arrival, the sisters began the work of teaching the children of German-speaking immigrants, usually under extreme conditions of poverty, deprivation and language barriers. The hardships of frontier survival and the demands of their missionary work literally forced them to adapt quickly to the exigencies of American life. In order to accommodate and meet the needs of the people whom they had come to serve, certain adaptations in the way Benedictine women had traditionally observed the Rule of Benedict became inevitable for women living that Rule in the American context.

The final chapter of this book is reserved for a detailed examination and analysis of the adaptations which characterized the life of Benedictine women during the foundation and expansion periods of their history in America. The data for the analysis flows from the stories of the ten new foundations of Benedictine women established between 1860 and 1881, as well as the stories of the five independent houses reconstructed in the previous chapter. Although the stories of the ten Benedictine houses founded during the expansion period cannot be told with as much detail as
the communities of the founding era, the perspective of thirty years of living Benedictine life in fifteen houses is necessary in order to validly assess how Benedictine life among women in America was reshaped between 1852 and 1881. What follows in this chapter, therefore, is a brief but necessary overview of the ten new communities founded during the expansion period.

**Chicago (1861) and Nauvoo, IL (1874)**

The first American daughterhouse, St. Benedict’s Convent, Erie, PA, established its second foundation in Chicago on August 23, 1861. Upon the request of Louis Fink, O.S.B., prior of St. Joseph Church, Chicago, the Prioress of Erie sent two sisters and a novice to teach in the parish school. Typically, their first dwelling was a one-room frame house, situated next to the church, with only a folding door separating the convent from the school.

Among the three foundresses was Frances Knapp, a third-time foundress and now the superior of the new community. Between the years 1855 and 1861 she had moved from Eichstätt to St. Marys, PA (1855), to Erie in 1856, and then to Chicago in 1861. Her stay in Chicago was to be short-lived, for scarcely a year later she and the novice returned to Erie due to limitations of language and age. They were replaced by two women from St. Marys—Nepomucene Ludwig and Adelberta Glatt. As early as February of 1862, the new community began receiving novices, and within a period of approximately seventeen years, increased its membership to a total of twenty-eight professed members.

Only thirteen years after its founding, and after having lost everything in the great Chicago fire of 1871, St. Benedict and St. Scholastica Convent of Chicago sent five women under the leadership of Ottilia Hoeveler to Nauvoo, IL, to establish an academy for young ladies. Four professed sisters and a candidate arrived in Nauvoo by way of a Mississippi River steamer on October 15, 1874. On November 2, St. Scholastica’s Academy opened with seven day students in attendance. Five years later, at the request of H. J. Reimbold, pastor of St. Peter and St. Paul Parish, and Bishop John Lancaster Spalding of Peoria, the new foundation became an autonomous community. The community received its
first two novices on October 19, 1879, approximately two weeks after it received its official independence from the Chicago motherhouse.

Atchison, KS (1863)

A new community founded under the patronage of St. Joseph, and located in Atchison, KS, came into being at a time when St. Joseph Convent in St. Cloud, MN, faced some challenging decisions about its future. Early in 1863, a group of Catholics in middle St. Cloud, dissatisfied with the performance of the sisters in the parochial school, decided to build a public school "not in competition with the parochial school, but as a substitute for it." This trouble with the people of St. Cloud caused the community of fourteen sisters to consider possible relocation.

Early in the summer of 1863, Prioress Willibalda Scherbauer learned of a request for sisters from the Benedictine monks in Atchison, KS. To learn more about their request, she traveled to Chicago and there inquired about the Kansas mission. Shortly after her return to St. Cloud, the "exodus to Kansas" took place. On November 1, 1863, seven women under the superiorship of Evangelista Kremmeter boarded a stagecoach bound for St. Paul, MN, where they would transfer to a Mississippi steamboat that would take them to their Kansas destination. They arrived in Atchison at eleven o'clock on the night of November 11. Unlike six other founding groups before them, they moved into a new convent specifically built for them, "a stately little frame building with two classrooms, living quarters, a small room which could be used for a chapel, and a graceful cupula topped by a cross. It looked like a convent. It had cost $4,150." Besides Evangelista Kremmeter, there was among this group of foundresses, another woman who had been a member of the first American foundation in St. Marys, PA—Gregoria Moser.

As early as December 1, 1863, St. Scholastica's Academy for young ladies opened with an enrollment of forty-three day students and one boarder. Many of these students were non-Catholic. The first candidate for membership in the community arrived that same winter, on December 27. Although the new community
was blessed with a relatively adequate building, the members suf­fered the usual problems of daily need and poverty. While the Academy for young ladies and the “Brown School” for boys pros­pered into the 1870’s, “expansion of the community was hindered by lack of a suitable location.” Nonetheless, the community numbered thirty professed sisters by June of 1879.  

**Ferdinand, IN (1867), Shoal Creek, AR (1879), and New Orleans, LA (1870)**

The first American “granddaughter house,” St. Walburg Monas­tery in Covington, KY, founded two new independent houses during the Order’s expansion period. There had been a school near the church in Ferdinand, IN, for twenty-five years before four Benedictine women from Kentucky arrived there. For the first twenty years, it had been taught by lay teachers, and from 1862 to 1867 by the Sisters of Providence who resigned at the end of the school year. Chrysostom Foffa, O.S.B., pastor of the Ferdi­nand parish, first appealed to St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt for sister teachers. Prioress Edwarda Schnitzer regretted her inability to comply with his request, but suggested he try to obtain sisters from one of the seven new foundations in America.  

Since Covington, KY, was geographically closer than any of the other motherhouses, Foffa visited the convent and personally filed his request for teaching sisters with Prioress Alexia Lechner. A canonical chapter was held, and the community voted in the af­firmative to establish a new mission in Ferdinand, with the under­standing that it would become an independent foundation as soon as it was securely established. Volunteers were then solic­ited, and from among them Prioress Alexia Lechner selected the four women who arrived in Ferdinand on August 20, 1867. A few days after their arrival, Foffa began teaching them English, and on August 30 they opened the school.

Difficult as it is to imagine, the new community accepted its first candidate for membership only two days after the pioneer women arrived in Ferdinand. A second candidate arrived a week later on September 1. Both of these candidates received the habit
of the Order approximately six months later at the motherhouse in Covington.

By 1870 the still dependent community moved into a new two-story convent, and by May of 1871 were secure enough in their foundation to become independent from the motherhouse. In 1872 the community held its first canonical election and selected the woman who had been their superior during the previous five years—Benedicta Berns. The community prospered, though not immune to the hardships and crises typical of the early decades of any new community. By June of 1879 the Convent of the Immaculate Conception of Ferdinand, IN, consisted of twenty-eight professed members, and was soon to establish a daughterhouse of its own.

The young community of Immaculate Conception was hardly in a position to found a new community just eleven years after its own founding in Ferdinand. However, 640 acres of land along the railroad from Little Rock to Fort Smith, AR, had been given to the Abbot of St. Meinrad, IN, by the Cairo and Fulton Railroad Company, with a view to attracting German Catholic settlers to the area. The donation of land carried with it the stipulation that a monastery be built on "whatever site of railroad land was satisfactory to the Abbot, plus an additional 100 acres for the establishment of a convent for Benedictine sisters who would conduct a parochial school at each place for the immigrants' children." Bishop Edward Fitzpatrick of Little Rock desperately needed both priests and sisters and so readily endorsed the proposal. However, when in the mid-1870s Abbot Martin Marty of St. Meinrad's approached the Prioress of Ferdinand with his request to send sisters to Arkansas, she was unwilling to send members of her community to a place so far away from the motherhouse, especially since there were already more demands than they could meet to staff schools in the Ohio Valley.

On May 13, 1878, the Ferdinand community elected its second prioress, Agatha Werb. Within a week of her election, she sent four sisters to Fort Totten in Dakota Territory to open a school for Native Americans. In September of the same year the new Prioress sent four sisters to Arkansas, a venture which would result in a new independent foundation.

The sisters first settled in Creole, AR, where the monks lived and began a school there. On January 23, 1879, they moved to Shoal Creek, ten miles from Creole, where they took up residence
in a convent built by the parishioners. This date marked the official founding of the first community of Benedictine women in Arkansas.

In spite of physical poverty, homesickness, and discouragement, the pioneer sisters opened a school for twenty children within a few days after their arrival. Perhaps it was dire poverty that prevented St. Scholastica Convent from accepting candidates for the first three years of its existence.

The first candidate arrived in March of 1882, and on October 30 of the same year the community’s first three novices were invested. The sources are unclear about who held the title of superior from 1879 to 1882. However, in May of 1882, the Prioress of Ferdinand appointed Meinrada Lex, from Immaculate Conception, to be superior of the new foundation in Shoal Creek. Five years later, on May 20, 1887, St. Scholastica Convent gained its independence.¹⁷

St. Walburg Monastery of Covington, KY, established a second daughterhouse during the expansion period of Benedictine women in America. On October 30, 1870, Prioress Alexia Lechner accompanied eight women from the Covington community to Holy Trinity Parish in New Orleans, LA. They had been invited to Holy Trinity by the Pastor, Leonard Thevis, who needed German-speaking sisters to educate his German parishioners. Less than three years later, the Covington community sacrificed another six sisters to staff a second parish school in New Orleans, St. Boniface.

Approximately eleven months after the arrival of the second group, the community at Holy Trinity became independent and elected their first Prioress, Scholastica Hoeveler.¹⁸ Shortly thereafter, the sisters at St. Boniface merged with the newly independent community and “a spacious solid frame building on 2428 Dauphine Street became the first motherhouse of the Benedictine Sisters in the South.”¹⁹ In spite of initial hardships and the threat of yellow fever, the community grew to a membership of seventeen professed sisters and nine novices within nine years. By 1879 the motherhouse, named Holy Family Convent, was responsible for three other branch houses—St. Boniface in New Orleans, Mater Dolorosa Convent in Carrollton, LA, and St. Scholastica’s in Covington, LA.²⁰
Elizabeth, NJ (1868)

St. Scholastica Convent on Shipman Street in Newark, NJ, granted independence to its first daughterhouse in Elizabeth, NJ,\(^{21}\) in 1868, four years after three sisters had been sent to St. Michael’s parish to teach the children of German immigrants. The sisters first arrived in Elizabeth in 1864, in response to a request from the pastor of St. Michael’s, Peter Henry Lemke, O.S.B.\(^{22}\) The precise date of their arrival is not known, but on September 29 of the same year the three pioneer women began classes for about seventy children. Among this little group of foundresses was Philomena Spiegel, one of the first forty women to form the community of St. Marys, PA, and a member of the third and last group of women to come to St. Marys from St. Walburg Convent, Eichštätt. Her stay in Elizabeth was to be short-lived, for in August of 1865 she returned to Newark, having been elected prioress there, a position she would fill until her death in 1884.

Needing more than three sisters for his school, Lemke appealed to the community at St. Marys, PA, since the Newark motherhouse could spare no more members. Accordingly, in 1865 St. Marys contributed two sisters, bringing the seminal community in Elizabeth, NJ, to a total of five. One of the sisters from St. Marys was Placida Graber, who had been invested with the first group of novices in 1853. The duration of her first experience as a “missionary” was short, for she returned to St. Marys some time before 1868.\(^{23}\) In the intervening years, however, St. Joseph Convent in St. Marys, PA, had sent another two members to Elizabeth, one in 1867 and another in 1868.

Exactly why the Elizabeth community withdrew from the Newark motherhouse in 1868 to become an independent foundation “is a fact shrouded in obscurity.”\(^{24}\) The convent’s chronicle of those early years does indicate that Walburga Hock, one of the three women who came to Elizabeth in 1864, was “chosen Prioress.” Whether that meant “election by the Sisters or appointment by Father Lemke is not clear.”\(^{25}\) Nevertheless, she was to hold the office of prioress for forty-five years.\(^{26}\)

The new motherhouse in Elizabeth, St. Walburga Convent, was not located at the first school the sisters staffed, St. Michael’s on Smith Street. St. Michael’s Church had been damaged by lightning in 1867, and as a result Lemke, the pastor, decided to relocate not only the church but the convent and school as well. By
September, 1868, a new convent-school building was completed on Magnolia Avenue. On July 16, 1869, the community received its first three novices, and within the next ten years grew to a total membership of twenty-three professed sisters.²⁷

Richmond, VA (1868), Carrolltown, PA (1870), and Creston, IA (1879)

St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, PA, depleted of membership and struggling to survive at the close of 1859, attempted four new foundations during the expansion period of the Order in America. Two of these houses did not survive into the twentieth century. St. Gertrude’s Convent, Shakopee, MN,²⁸ founded on October 9, 1862, was suppressed by Bishop John Ireland of St. Paul on August 9, 1880. The nineteen members of the Shakopee community amalgamated with the twenty-three-year-old convent in St. Joseph, MN, shortly thereafter. Annunciation Convent, established in 1865 in Nebraska City, NE,²⁹ was dissolved in 1888 under the direction of Thomas Bonacum of the new diocese of Lincoln. Eight of the eleven sisters were accepted by the community in Atchison, KS, two went to Covington, KY, and Emmerana Bader was taken in by the community in Elizabeth, NJ, where she stayed for approximately six months.³⁰

The other two communities founded by St. Marys, PA, during this period succeeded and exist up to the present day—the convent founded in Richmond, VA (now located in Bristow, VA), and the foundation begun in Carrolltown, PA (now located in Pittsburgh, PA).

The School Sisters of Notre Dame from Milwaukee, WI, first began the school at St. Mary’s parish, Richmond, VA, where the Jesuits had been serving since 1851. When the Jesuits withdrew from the parish in 1860, Bishop John McGill appealed to Boniface Wimmer to supply a priest for the parish. Thus it was that the first Benedictine arrived in the city of Richmond, which was soon to find itself at the center of the ensuing War Between the States. Leonard Mayer, O.S.B., along with the Notre Dame sisters, managed to maintain the church and school during the greater part of the war-torn period. Just one year before the war ended, however,
The parish was forced to close the school and "the Notre Dame Sisters bade farewell to Richmond and the little convent on Fourth Street which had housed them and their pupils during their sojourn in Richmond." 31

It was to this "little convent on Fourth Street" that two Benedictine women came on May 1, 1868. A month earlier, Leonard Mayer had traveled to St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, PA, to lay his request for teaching sisters before Prioress Theresa Vogel. As was the case in five earlier instances, the community at St. Marys again agreed to sacrifice members for the sake of service to the children of German immigrants. The sisters received a warm welcome in Richmond. "All the children of the parish had been assembled before the rectory to welcome the pastor and Sisters," and after May Devotions, "the two nuns were escorted by the congregation to the convent on Fourth Street, a short two blocks away. Here they found the house decorated with flowers and legends of welcome." 32 In July a third sister from St. Marys joined them, and by the middle of August the three women opened a school in the basement of St. Mary's Church. That same autumn a private school, St. Mary's Benedictine Institute, was opened at the convent with classes held in the parlor. The two schools flourished from the beginning, and between the years 1869 and 1874 four more sisters came from St. Marys, PA, to help staff the schools.

It became increasingly apparent during those early years that the community needed to move toward independence. The distance between the Pennsylvania motherhouse and the Richmond community was prohibitive, and the prospect of receiving further assistance by way of personnel to staff the schools was lessening. Since many young women from Richmond were seeking admission into the new Benedictine community, independence was granted and sanctioned by James Gibbons, Bishop of Richmond, in the summer of 1874.

Edith Vogel was elected the first prioress and managed to lead the fledgling community through the difficult times that lay ahead. The ravages of war had left many people in a financial situation that prevented them from offering the sisters substantial aid. For the same reason tuition at St. Mary's Benedictine Institute was minimal, and netted the community little income. 33 Consequently, the spectre of poverty was ever-present, along with
disease, death, and the inevitable misunderstandings with ecclesiastical superiors. 34

Nevertheless, three candidates were received into the novitiate in the spring of 1875, and another three on November 13 of the same year. In spite of the fact that several sisters had returned to the motherhouse in Pennsylvania, and that one member had been lost to death in 1876, the community numbered eight professed members and one novice by June of 1879.35

The fourth foundation begun by St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, PA, during the expansion period of the Order in America originated in Carrolltown, PA, and Johnstown, PA, in 1870. However, it took nineteen years to determine that the permanent location of the novitiate and motherhouse should be in Pittsburgh, PA.36

The story of the early years of the community is complex, but clearly reveals the dominant role played by the Bishop of Pittsburgh in the foundation of this new community of Benedictine women. In response to a request from Bishop Michael Domenec of Pittsburgh, Prioress Theresa Vogel of St. Marys, PA, sent two sisters to Johnstown, PA, on August 29, 1870, to take charge of St. John’s School. A month and a half later, complying with the same request of Bishop Domenec, she sent three women to Carrolltown, PA, to teach in the parochial school. Romana Bernhard, a woman who had been invested with the fourth group of novices at St. Marys fifteen years earlier, was one of the foundresses in Carrolltown.

The following year, 1871, St. Scholastica’s Convent in Carrolltown was designated as the motherhouse of the Benedictine sisters in the Diocese of Pittsburgh, with Adelgunda Feldman as the first superior. In 1872 the motherhouse was moved to Johnstown, a move which proved to be only temporary. Before long, “the unhealthful location of the convent in Johnstown began to affect the health of the Sisters and necessitated a change back to Carrolltown.”37

Within a few years the question of location would arise again, this time at the bidding of external forces. In 1876, when the Diocese of Pittsburgh was divided to create the new See of Allegheny, Bishop John Tuigg of Altoona replaced Bishop Domenec in Pittsburgh. It was his wish and order that all the Benedictine sisters be concentrated in his diocese. Therefore, in 1878 the Carrolltown community accepted the responsibility for a large
school at St. Mary’s parish, North Side, Pittsburgh, in exchange for the branch house in Johnstown. Prodding them one step further, Bishop Tuigg suggested that the women move their motherhouse from Carrolltown to Pittsburgh and that they work toward independence from their founding community in St. Marys, PA. The sisters were reluctant to leave Catholic Carrolltown, but in 1881 they purchased a brick mansion in Pittsburgh which became the Johnstown-Carrolltown community’s new motherhouse. Perhaps it was further reluctance that accounted for the delay in transferring the novitiate from Carrolltown to Pittsburgh.

After long deliberation the community’s process toward independence was completed, when in 1889 the members “acceded to the wishes of the bishop” and moved the novitiate to St. Mary’s, North Side, Pittsburgh. In spite of the nineteen-year-long question regarding the location of the motherhouse, the community accepted candidates and invested novices from its earliest beginnings in Carrolltown. Within nine years after its founding, when the motherhouse was still located in Carrolltown, St. Scholastica Convent numbered thirty-three professed sisters, one novice and seven postulants. They had already lost five members to death by June of 1879.

St. Joseph Convent, Tulsa, OK, traces its origin to Mount St. Mary Convent, Pittsburgh, PA, and was the last foundation to be made during the span of years designated in this study as the expansion period of Bavarian Benedictinism among women in America. The beginnings of the Creston-Guthrie-Tulsa community have remained somewhat obscure until only recently. Of interest here is Tulsa’s connection with the foundations of the East established during this period.

On October 18, 1879, three Benedictine women arrived in the village of Creston, IA, the place which was to be their home for the next decade or two. Paula O’Reilly, Anselma Kelly and Angela McNamara had left their Benedictine motherhouse at Carrolltown, PA, to establish an English-speaking motherhouse at Creston. It was through the instrumentality of Eugene Phelan, O.S.B., prior of the then independent foundation of monks in Creston, and Boniface Wimmer that the sisters opened and operated a parochial school in St. Malachy’s parish. The sources seem to indicate, however, that this new foundation of Benedictine women was more the “project” of Paula O’Reilly than it was the corporate effort of the Pittsburgh community to establish a new
community. It is true, however, that Prioress Adelgunda Feldman of Carrolltown approved of the Creston venture, and asked for volunteers from her community to accompany the foundress to Iowa.

As was so typical of the foundations made during this era, candidates sought entrance into the Creston community soon after the arrival of the foundresses. The first candidate arrived on November 18, 1879, and became a novice on December 8, 1880. Although new members continued to swell the ranks of the community, the Creston years were stormy ones.

In September of 1889, Paula O’Reilly responded to a request of the Prefect Apostolic of Oklahoma and the Indian Territory for sisters to instruct children. She sent three sisters to open St. Mary’s parochial school at Guthrie, OK. At that point in time she could not have foreseen that Guthrie would become and remain the new location of the Creston community’s motherhouse into the middle of the twentieth century.

The Expansion Years

The above summary of the development of the female branch of Benedictinism in America during the Order’s expansion period has been necessarily brief and sketchy. And yet it is an important preliminary step toward the task awaiting the final chapter of this book. The preceding overview forms a backdrop against which an analysis of the characteristic way of life among Benedictine women during their first thirty years in America can proceed.

Although the immediate focus in this chapter has been on the phenomenon of rapid geographical expansion between the years 1860 and 1881, it is important to bear in mind the expansion dynamics described by Fitz and Cada in their study of the life cycle of religious communities. In their schema, the expansion period encompasses that time in a community’s history during which the founding charism begins to be institutionalized. The “founding myth” takes shape as stories of the pioneer days are handed down to new members and decisive events begin to stand out as part of the founding story. During the expansion period procedures for community decision-making and communication
develop, and norms and customs are established. Large numbers join the community at this time and new works are rapidly taken on which further the possibility of a still broader recruitment. 49

Assuredly, the backdrop against which the analysis in chapter five will proceed is a complex one. In addition to the factors of rapid geographic growth and the inner workings of the expansion dynamic, the historical era in focus here was marked by rapid socio-economic change and the birth pangs of a nascent Catholicism in mission territory of the Roman Church. Diversity and change were clearly the dominant features of the experience of Benedictine women during their founding and expansion periods in America. Despite nearly rampant diversity, however, it is possible to discover in the way of life described in the sources, a continuity of experience which gave shape to the tradition Benedictine women transplanted from St. Walburg Convent in Eichstatt, Bavaria. There is enough evidence to observe that at one level the tradition of their European monastic life continued essentially the same as it had for fourteen hundred years, with its steady rhythm of prayer, work, and communal interaction. At another level, the process of transplanting their inherited tradition necessitated some fundamental innovations which clearly reshaped their way of life and took into account the realities of their time and place in American history.

Notes


2 Ibid.

3 Catalogue, 1879.

4 Nepomucene served the community as Superior from 1862 to 1866, at which time she returned to St. Marys “upon the expiration of her temporary loan to Chicago.” SSPA


7 Ibid., p. 55.

8 This date of departure is that given by Regina Baska in *The Benedictine Congregation of St. Scholastica*, p. 87.


10 Baska, p. 91.


13 Dudine, pp. 26–27.

14 Catalogue, 1879, pp. 48–51


16 Sharum, pp. 2–21. The community remained in Shoal Creek until the move to Fort Smith, AR, in 1925.

17 The annals of St. Walburg Monastery, Covington, KY, indicate that this separation came about as a result of misunderstanding and conflict between the sisters living at Holy Family Convent (associated with Holy
Trinity Church), and the Prioress of their motherhouse in Covington, KY, Alexia Lechner. See “Chronik der Inwohnerinnen des Klosters St. Walburga, Covington, Kentucky, 1863–1912.” English translation by Julia Koenig, O.S.B., SWMA, pp. 8–9; see also Baska, pp. 59–60.

19 Florina Spalek, O.S.B., “Sketch: Community of Benedictine Sisters, St. Scholastica Priory, Covington, LA.” This sketch was sent to the author of this study on October 16, 1986. There appears to be no comprehensive history of this community to date.

20 Catalogue, 1879, pp. 56–58. In 1903, the motherhouse moved from New Orleans to Covington, LA, where it remained until its recent dissolution in 1987.


22 This pioneer German missionary, “a man of astonishing vigor and autocratic methods,” with a “complex and somewhat unusual career,” was to become a dominant figure in the early history of the Benedictine community in Elizabeth (Campbell, p. 3). In fact, as early as 1835, Lemke met Boniface Wimmer in Munich, a meeting which was to involve him directly in the settlement of European Benedictine monks in Pennsylvania. For a concise sketch of Lemke’s life and work, see Campbell, Chosen for Peace, pp. 3–12; see also Lawrence M. Flick, “Biographical Sketch of Reverend Peter H. Lemke, O.S.B., 1796–1882,” Records of the American Catholic Historical Society 9 (1898): 184ff, and Terence Kardong, O.S.B., “Peter Henry Lemke: ‘Brave Soldier of the Lord’ or Gyrovague,” Tjurunga: An Australian Benedictine Review 24 (1983): 44–65.

23 Campbell, p. 21. It appears that she remained in St. Marys until her death on November 16, 1905. The Elk County Gazette reported her death, noting that “she died here Tuesday evening at the age of seventy. She came here before the St. Marys Church was built, and was one of the first to receive the habit here.” Quoted in Albert Brehm, History of St. Marys Church, (St. Marys, PA: Lenze Associated Enterprises Inc., 1960), p. 73.

24 Campbell, p. 28.

25 Ibid., p. 21.

26 Ibid., p. 27. Campbell adds: “... being duly re-elected every three years, as was the custom until the revision of canon law in 1910.”


30 Emmerana Bader and Frances Knapp (one of the Nebraska City members who went to Covington, KY) were among the first forty women who comprised the first community of Benedictine women in America.


32 Johnston, p. 11.

33 Baska, p. 100.

34 Johnston, p. 16.


36 *Benedictine Sisters of Pittsburgh, 1870–1970* (Pittsburgh, PA: By Mount St. Mary Convent, 4530 Perrysville Avenue, 1970). This centennial booklet is predominantly pictorial and provides little historical data. For a historical sketch of the community’s beginnings, see Baska, pp. 102–105.


38 Baska, p. 104.


40 Baska, p. 104. This author reports 1887 as the date for the transferral of the novitiate. The more accurate date seems to be 1889, as recorded in “Mount and Mission,” cited in n. 37.

41 *Catalogue*, 1879, pp. 59–62.

42 Mary Louis George’s purpose in the study cited in n. 37 was to gather “under one cover all information about her [Mother Paula O’Reilly] which is available” (Foreward). In so doing, the author succeeded in illuminating the Tulsa community’s relationship to the 1870
foundation of Benedictine women in Carrolltown, PA. See especially, pp. 13–62, of Mother Paula O'Reilly.

43 The community affiliations of these foundresses were mixed. Paula O'Reilly first entered the Newark, NJ, community and was invested as a novice on March 3, 1866. She professed her first vows there in 1867 and her final vows in 1870. Records in the archives of the Newark/Ridgely community indicate that she went to Elizabeth, NJ, on August 4, 1871, with the intent of transferring to that community. But some time between 1871 and 1874 she transferred again to St. Scholastica's Convent, Carrolltown, PA (George, pp. 11–13). Tulsa, OK, records indicate that Anselma Kelly entered the novitiate at St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, PA, in the fall of 1874. (The archives of the community in St. Marys, PA, however, have no record of her ever having been there.) The Carrolltown-Pittsburgh records give January 4, 1877, as the date of her investiture there, along with August 1, 1878, as the date of her first profession (George, p. 28). As for the third Creston foundress, Angela McNamara, it is not known whether she was recruited or volunteered from the community in Elizabeth, NJ, the convent of her entrance in 1875 and first profession in 1877 (George, p. 26).

46 Ibid., pp. 41–62.
48 Guthrie, OK, became the official location of the motherhouse on October 10, 1892. For a brief sketch of the Creston-Guthrie years, see Baska, pp. 105–107. In 1955 the motherhouse relocated a second time in Tulsa, OK.

49 Shaping the Coming Age of Religious Life, pp. 55–56.
Chapter V

A Way of Life
Transplanted and
Reshaped: 1852–1881

A current researcher of nineteenth-century sisters and their role in the creation of an American way of religious life observed the following about Benedictine women's experience in the latter half of the nineteenth century:

For these sisters, adaptation became an agonizing process of trying to determine whether Benedictinism was viable at all in the American setting, or whether their distinctiveness would disappear to the point where they would become indistinguishable from the active congregations. . . . During the mission period, adaptation for this order was especially threatening—and came just short of completely destroying their particular character.  

The scope and purpose of Margaret Thompson's forthcoming book does not require her to elaborate upon or document this observation of Benedictine women during their founding and expansion periods in America. However, her observation does highlight the central task of this chapter, which is to find the normative thread, the continuity of experience which constituted the genuine meaning and truth of their tradition in mid-to-late nineteenth century America. The work of chapter five is to document how Benedictine women in America not only escaped the destruction
of their “particular character” during the founding and expansion periods of their history, but more positively how they reshaped the elements of their ancient European tradition into a new expression of life according to the Rule of Benedict—a way of life which soon proved its viability within the cultural and religious context of nineteenth-century America. What came to birth during the foundation and expansion years of American Benedictine women was “a unique expression of the monastic charism, faithfully stable yet constantly adapting.”

**Preliminary Observations**

The story in chapters two, three and four of this book reveals a living dynamic of change and adaptation. To a large extent, the story speaks for itself. However, there remains a host of interpretative questions soliciting responses that are crucial to the task of historical retrieval. The more important of these questions cluster around the process of Americanization that consciously or unconsciously took place among Benedictine women during the early decades of their frontier history. How much of the change and adaptation they experienced between 1852 and 1881 was a matter of mere happenstance? To what degree were their departures from the European tradition intentional? Was Americanization for them a process of simply accepting the exigencies of the time, or the result of conscious adaptation? In what ways did “the American way” foster or force change in their traditional way of life? What themes of Americanization were positive stimuli for survival and growth? How did Bavarian Benedictinism run counter to the American character? And finally, what motivated so many young women, born and raised in American settings, to join the struggling communities of Benedictine women? Was it divine inspiration alone, or a genuine longing on the part of these women for a superior way of life? Or was it a desire to retreat from certain American values?

Specific responses to these questions await the subsequent analysis of the way of life among Benedictine women during their foundation and expansion periods. However, some preliminary observations from the evidence supplied in the story of the
preceding chapters may serve to provide an analytical framework for the retrieval task.

It would be a misinterpretation of historical fact to imagine that the Roman Decree of 1859 signaled a clean break on the part of American houses of Benedictine women from their European origins. Yet, it is abundantly clear that their identity and work between the years 1852 and 1881 was markedly different from that of their Eichstatt motherhouse. Thus, a major dynamic at work during this Americanization period was the interplay between European dependence and openmindedness to the American scene.

Certain aspects of European dependence stand out in the story of the first three decades. Benedictine houses of women prided themselves when they were able to sustain a daily religious horarium similar to the order of the day observed at St. Walburg Convent in Eichstatt. It was burdensome to them when Boniface Wimmer or some other well-meaning prelate imposed a daily schedule unfamiliar to them. All too frequently the foundresses of the early communities, especially those who had entered at Eichstatt and had experienced the Old World way of life, naively thought that a transplanted version of European monastic practices could work in any set of American circumstances. Unnecessary hardships and internal conflicts were often the result of such attempts. Benedicta Riepp herself embodied the desire to remain physically in touch with the European tradition. Her trip to Europe in 1857 was an unsuccessful attempt to communicate the deep desire of Benedictine women in the New World to be claimed and validated by their community of origin.

In general, the interest in “things European” remained constant for decades, and was reflected in the correspondence that passed between America and Europe. Eleven of Benedicta Riepp’s fifteen extant letters were addressed to Europe. And Willibald Scherbauer’s thirty-year correspondence with Prioress Edwarda Schnitzer reflects the longstanding desire of a segment of Benedictine women in America to be accepted as the “dear children” of their Eichstatt motherhouse.

Although the European Benedictine tradition was strong among the pioneers in America, there was an obvious willingness to allow American elements to enter that tradition. Certain realities of the American scene were not only inescapable in their experience, but had a positive impact on their survival and growth.
during the pioneer period. Four principal aspects of the mid-nineteenth century American reality were shapers of a new expression of Benedictine life among women in America: the frontier, the European immigrant population, the need for education, and the missionary character of the Roman Church.

Almost immediately upon their arrival in 1852, Benedictine women were swept up into the American frontier sense of unlimited potential. They quickly caught the spirit of optimism and unflagging faith in the face of hardship. This was abundantly clear in their ability to incorporate large numbers of new members, and in the consequent rapid geographic expansion.

Benedictine women’s identification with the newly transplanted European immigrant was immediate. It was a heavily nationalistic identification with German immigrants, whose poverty as well as promise became their own. If it is true to say that the history of the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century was the history of immigration, then the experience of Benedictine women in America was part and parcel of that history.

The need for education and catechesis was the principal means of contact between Benedictine sisters and immigrant families. In response to this need, Benedictine women joined the ranks of other American sisterhoods whose charge it was to educate young women toward the ideal of “true womanhood,” which was held up for the emulation of nineteenth-century American women. Catholic women were supposed to be “the moral centers of their homes, instructors of their children, and inspiration of their husbands,” and it was frequently from the sisters that they learned the lessons they were to teach in their homes. For women who did not wish to be wives and mothers, “the convent was a perfect place for Catholic women to develop and use all of their talents and abilities.” Many vocations to Benedictine life were largely the result of the close identification between convent and school during this period.

The missionary character of American Catholicism was the catalyst for a particular dilemma which confronted both Benedictine women and men of this era—“the dilemma of preserving their traditions and serving the needs of the Church on a fluid frontier in modern times.” The tension that resulted from efforts to balance missionary activism with faithful monastic observance during the pioneer period, became the major force behind the shaping of a distinctively American Benedictinism for women
and men alike. The long tradition of enclosure for Benedictine women, no longer possible on a missionary frontier, exacerbated their immediate and long-term struggle to gain the Church's official recognition of their monastic character.

Finally, the influence of American pragmatism and idealism must be taken into account in the following analysis of the way of life which characterized Benedictine women in America between the years 1852 and 1881. These women lived the impracticality of certain European traditions non-conducive to the American environment, while their male counterparts attempted to articulate the necessary changes and adaptations in constitutions and statutes. Innumerable Eichstätt customs and traditions took second place to the practical demands of a new land and an immigrant people. And yet, it was a single-minded idealism of purpose that accounted for the tremendous growth of the Benedictine spirit among women in the pioneer days of their American history. Moreover, American pragmatism and idealism merely reinforced the strength of character and spiritual stamina that had already been the legacy of their Eichstätt foremothers.

These preliminary observations, focused on six Americanizing factors—the frontier, the European immigrant population, the need for education, the missionary character of American Catholicism, pragmatism, and idealism—are a prelude to exploring precisely how these realities reshaped the Bavarian Benedictine tradition among women into a nineteenth-century American expression of life according to the Rule of Benedict. The following exploration will proceed under five major headings: 1) The Rule of Benedict, Statutes and Constitutions, 2) Benedictine Vowing, 3) The Cenobitic Life, 4) Work, and 5) Prayer.

The Rule of Benedict, Statutes and Constitutions

At the moment Benedicta Riepp, Walburga Dietrich and Maura Flieger set foot on American soil on July 4, 1852, a new form of the ancient Benedictine tradition began its evolution. Presumably, their meagre belongings included a copy of the Rule of Benedict and the Konstitutionen of 1846, then in use at St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt. The Rule of Benedict had anchored their tradition
through fourteen centuries of cultural upheaval and religious reform, but statutes and constitutions adapting the way of Benedict to particular times and circumstances had come and gone throughout the centuries. Despite nearly heroic efforts on the part of these pioneer Benedictine women to transplant the Eichstätt observance as described in the *Konstitutionen* of 1846, it was dishearteningly apparent from the beginning that the prescriptions therein were alien to the circumstances in which they found themselves in America.

It would take thirty years of change and adaptation before the new form of Benedictine life for women in America would become discernible enough to be articulated in the form of a constitution adapting the *Rule* “for the Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict in the United States of North America.”

The European document of 1846 and the proposed American constitution of 1880 provide a framework within which to analyze some of the similarities and dissimilarities between the American experience of Benedictine life and the Bavarian tradition so deeply rooted in the hearts of the American foundresses. Even a cursory comparison of the topics addressed in these two documents bears witness to the transitional character of Benedictine life for women in America between 1852 and 1881. At the same time, however, the normative thread of the tradition—the essential values of prayer, work and communal interaction—is also readily apparent.

The centrality of the *Rule of Benedict* in the lives of its followers was unquestionable during the period under study here. Moreover, the need for its adaptation to prevailing circumstances was equally unquestionable, both in the post-secularization period of St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt, and in mid-nineteenth century North America. Bishop Karl August von Reisach’s central concern in the *Konstitutionen* promulgated for St. Walburg’s Convent on July 11, 1846, was the adaptation of the *Rule* “to the present circumstances” without departing from its “essential prescriptions.”

At the visitation of your convent undertaken last year, we came to the conclusion and informed you that you are in need of a special constitution for your community. This should give you specific regulations concerning the conventual order. Therefore, we immediately began drawing up the same. Upon careful examination of your Holy Rule, we noticed that it was originally written for different circumstances, and not for women, but men. To adapt this to the
present circumstances, there is a need for clearer interpretation and more specific regulations. This ought to be done in such a way, that on the one hand, the Holy Rule will be perfectly followed, and on the other hand, that all which concerns the present call of the community as a teaching institute, for which nothing is regulated in the Holy Rule, would be specifically laid down.\textsuperscript{11}

Thirty-four years later, the preface to the \textit{Constitution of St. Scholas­tica} reflected a similar concern for fidelity to the \textit{Rule of Benedict} and the need for adaptation.

The purpose of this constitution is to give firm basis and stability to the communities of the Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict; to regulate their manner of government; to define more clearly such customs and observances as are according to the purpose of the Holy Rule, and the circumstances of the country \ldots\textsuperscript{12}

There is no concrete evidence to indicate what text of the \textit{Rule} and which statutes and constitutions were used by Benedictine women in America from 1852 to 1881. The earliest edition of the \textit{Rule of Benedict} to be found in archival repositories is a German edition published by Benziger Brothers in 1856.\textsuperscript{13} A small pocket-sized and well worn book preserved among the belongings of Willibalda Scherbauer, first Superior in St. Cloud, suggests another format through which the teachings of the \textit{Rule} may have been learned, both in Eichstätt and later in America. A near paraphrase of the \textit{Rule}, it served as a practical compendium of instructions and applications of all matters concerning the \textit{Rule of Benedict}. In precise and methodical style, one section on prayer closely resembles chapter 20 of the \textit{Rule}, “Reverence in Prayer.”

My Holy Rule demands of me that: 1. I devote myself constantly to prayer 2. I confess to God in daily prayer my past sins with tears and sighs 3. I change my evil ways 4. I petition God with the utmost humility and sincere devotion 5. I remember that he does not answer my prayer because of many words, but because of purity of heart and tears of compunction 6. My prayer should be short and pure 7. I don’t pray with a loud voice but with tears and heartfelt devotion so as not to irritate anyone.\textsuperscript{14}

Any attempt to determine the exact nature of materials and the extent of attention and energy given to studying and learning the way of Benedict in America during the early decades is an effort not unlike “grasping at straws.” It would seem that the struggle to survive and be of service to the German immigrants overshadowed time and energy left over for study and formation in Benedictine life.\textsuperscript{15}
Equally obscure is the role of the Eichstätt constitution in the life of Benedictine women during their founding and expansion years in America. In her first extant letter, Benedicta Riepp acknowledged the near impossibility of observing the Rule and enclosure in the manner to which they had been accustomed in Europe. As early as 1857, Boniface Wimmer claimed responsibility for the governance of the women, and explained his solution in their regard to King Ludwig’s Court Chaplain:

... I thought myself justified and obliged to see to it that they obey the Holy Rule properly, and follow it according to our own Statutes as much as possible, so that they will be trained to become good nuns and teachers and that they also support themselves in the temporal sphere by a well-ordered domestic economy. ... According to the *jus canonicum*, the sisters always enjoy the same privileges as the monks do; they would, therefore, be exempt here and the President of the Congregation at the time would be their highest superior, as I have considered myself to be. ... The Prioress of St. Walburg cannot be their superior either because she is too far away and does not understand American conditions. ... Benedictine women religious always belonged to the Congregation (at least in early times)—that I can demonstrate from history.

Given the seriousness of the rift between Benedicta Riepp and Boniface Wimmer over the question of jurisdiction already developing at the time the above letter was written, it is difficult to conceive that Wimmer’s imposition of the Cassinese Statutes met with any measure of success among the women at St. Marys.

Although there is no clear evidence to indicate what statutes or constitutions were being followed during the first thirty years of Benedictine women in America, archival evidence suggests that various versions of statutes from St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt were used and adapted during these decades. At least four of the houses under study here have preserved a copy of the *Konstitutionen* of 1846 in their archives. An edition entitled *Statuten des Klosters St. Walburg nach der Regel unsers heiligen Vaters Benediktus* bears a conjectured date, 1854, and raises some fascinating questions about the process of adaptation. It consists of thirteen chapters, taken nearly word for word from among the thirty-one chapters of the 1846 *Konstitutionen*. The bulk of the chapters omitted deal with the initiation process of new members and the prescriptions dealing with faults committed.

A more common edition of statutes and constitutions originating at or adapted from St. Walburg’s in Eichstätt is dated
1876. It includes the thirteen chapters of the 1854 edition, plus nine additional chapters covering such topics as the chapter of faults, the kitchen and wardrobe, the seamstress, pronouncing vows and voting.

The findings discussed in the preceding paragraphs raise more questions than answers. Exactly who was responsible for these varying editions and where the editing was being done, in Europe or America, remains the critical question. One centennial historian notes that until 1880, the statutes and customs of her house consisted "of handwritten copies brought from Eichstätt together with such changes and additions as had been made since the sisters settled in Minnesota. Each sister, as was the custom, had made her own copy of this document from a copy of the document and in the course of time many discrepancies had crept in." Frederica Dudine of Ferdinand, IN, attests to the same practice of copying copies in her community, and draws some conclusions about the authorship of some of the early constitutions in America.

When the sisters came from Eichstätt to St. Marys, Pennsylvania, they observed the Eichstätt constitution, considerably altered by Abb. Wimmer. When the Sisters moved on to Erie, Covington, and then Ferdinand, further modifications were made. In fact, Father Eberhard Stadler [chaplain from 1871–1886] wrote a new constitution for the Ferdinand Sisters.

Despite the obscurity surrounding the issue of early statutes and constitutions, a strong attachment to the tradition and observances of St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt is evident in the lives of the pioneer Benedictine women of this era. The attachment was significant in view of their official separation from the European Motherhouse mandated in the Roman Decree of 1859, and the subsequent ill feeling toward the American houses expressed by Prioress Edwarda Schnitzer shortly thereafter. Sometimes their attachment received formal articulation, as was the case as late as 1870 at St. Walburga Convent in Elizabeth, NJ. That year their first three novices professed triennial vows "... according to the rule of St. Benedict and the statutes of the congregation in Bavaria." Considerably later, the desire to know what observances were customary in Eichstätt was articulated in a letter written by Willibalda Scherbauer of St. Joseph to Prioress Edwarda Schnitzer in Eichstätt.
... Mother Aloysia [Bath] requested me to write you, urgently asking you to send us, if possible, a copy of your Constitution and Customs, whether printed or written. ... Of course, not everything will be applicable, but most will be. Besides, old customs are venerable and often to be preferred to new ones. Dear, good Mother, you will give us the greatest joy if you grant us this wish. Our convent, which has 286 sisters, not including candidates, will remember your venerable community in prayer, but I, above all. I am from St. Walburg's and your spiritual child. We did have a copy of your Statutes, but it is no longer here. Very likely it was burned along with other important things several years ago.26

Prioress Edwarda granted her request, stating: "... I do it very willingly, so that the spirit of our Holy Father Benedict will again be established and the dear Lord will be more glorified."27

It is interesting to note that Willibalda Scherbauer's request for a copy of the Statutes used in Eichstätt was made seventeen years after an American constitution for Benedictine women had been drafted and adopted, with qualifications, in many of the existing houses including her own.28 The story behind the emergence of a constitution for sisters of the Order of St. Benedict in North America has been treated at length elsewhere.29 Suffice it to say here, that during his reign as Abbot, Boniface Wimmer had registered repeated requests in Rome to unite the Benedictine houses of women in America into one congregation under his jurisdiction as Abbot-General. None of his proposals matured before his death in 1887, for neither Rome nor the respective bishops in dioceses where the sisters were located appeared to recognize the proposed advantages of an American congregation of Benedictine women. However, when Louis Mary Fink, O.S.B. became the first American Benedictine bishop and took up his See in Leavenworth, KS, in 1877, the cause of uniformity among Benedictine communities of women in the United States became one of his major concerns.

Bishop Fink had been a close observer of Benedictinism among women in America for quite some time. Having been prior of the monks in Chicago from 1860 to 1868, he had been involved in the founding of St. Benedict and St. Scholastica Convent there in 1861. His next assignment as prior in Atchison, KS, from 1868 to 1871, involved him in the development of St. Scholastica Convent, founded in Atchison five years before his arrival. As Co-adjutor Bishop of the Diocese of Leavenworth from 1871 to 1877, he had presided at investitures and profession ceremonies at the
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convent and had manifested keen interest in the slowly growing community and its place “within the vast fabric of the Church.” Scarcely a year after he became the Bishop of Leavenworth, he wrote to Rome about the situation of the Benedictine women in his diocese. His concern focused on the questionable character of their monastic identity: “In my heart I keep thinking that they are not really nuns because they no longer take solemn vows or go to the Divine Office as was customary for Benedictine sisters.”

In May of 1878, Cardinal Simeoni’s reply to Bishop Fink included the recommendation that a congregation be formed for the purpose of uniformity among Benedictine convents in the United States. He urged that Bishop Fink seek the approval of other bishops in whose dioceses Benedictine women were located, and if possible to call a Chapter of the sisters themselves. The Cardinal requested a future report on the spiritual and temporal situation of the sisters and a copy of a proposed constitution. The Cardinal’s recommendation only reinforced what was already in progress, for Bishop Fink had begun to formulate a set of constitutions for the Benedictine women in his diocese as early as 1877.

A first attempt, in 1879, to assemble the superiors of the Benedictine women’s houses in the United States for the purpose of reviewing the proposed constitution failed, due to the outbreak of a smallpox epidemic in Covington, KY, the chosen site of the meeting. However, two years later the superiors of the Benedictine houses in the midwest—Luitgard Huber of Chicago, Scholastica Kerst of St. Joseph, MN, and Evangelista Kremmert of Atchison, KS—met with Bishop Fink in Atchison and determined that Evangelista convoked a “general chapter” for the purpose of examining the constitution draft and discussing the feasibility of a congregation under the leadership of a “Mother General.”

The first, though unofficial, general chapter of American Benedictine women convened at St. Scholastica and St. Benedict’s Convent in Chicago on July 19, 1881. Superiors representing five of the then-established fifteen communities attended, four of whom were accompanied by “delegates” from their respective houses: Alexia Lechner from Covington, KY, accompanied by Walburga Saelinger and Evangelista Pfangle, the superior of their branch house in Tuscumbia, AL; Luitgard Huber from Chicago, IL, with Theresa Krug as delegate; Scholastica Kerst and Aloysia Bath from St. Joseph, MN; Evangelista Kremmert and
Although the constitution under consideration seemed to reflect, in general, the current practice and tradition of Benedictine women in America, the members of the assembly in Chicago had serious misgivings about adopting it officially. The congregational model of government was foreign to their history and tradition, and the suggestion of a common novitiate was to become a major stumbling block in the implementation of the constitution within the year following the Chicago meeting. Consequently, the constitution was tentatively and reluctantly adopted, in spite of certain changes made within the document “to maintain the primacy of the chapter of the individual monastery and the basic autonomy of each.” The members of the Chicago meeting agreed to try the constitution and to meet again in three years. Other business at the meeting included the election of officers to govern the proposed congregation. Evangelista Kremmeter of Atchison was elected Mother General, Alexia Lechner of Covington, First Assistant, and Luitgard Huber of Chicago, Second Assistant. In the final session on July 21, the superiors and delegates agreed to adopt uniform dress, changing the style of veil worn at Eichstatt, to the soft unlined black veil worn by the English Benedictines.

Three years passed, and the prioresses failed to meet again as had been planned. In addition to the disagreements and general lack of organization following the 1881 general chapter, Evangelista Kremmeter had resigned her position as prioress of the Atchison community in 1884, thereby also vacating the position of Mother General of the unofficial Congregation of St. Scholastica. In September of 1885, Scholastica Kerst wrote to Alexia Lechner of Covington, KY, expressing concern about the vacancy resulting from Evangelista’s resignation. Alexia’s response betrayed the general lack of enthusiasm and disillusionment regarding the formation of a congregation of Benedictine women in America.

Referring to our congregation, I would state that I wrote to Mother Evangelista last year that, even though it would be time to have a second chapter held, we cannot make any further steps in this matter before the statutes are approved by Rome. While it was good and pleasant that we had an opportunity to meet and consult with one another, still, this traveling about and holding chapters “on our own
hook,” and to continue that or repeat it every three years without any special authority or sanction—and that from Rome—would in the end appear ridiculous, not to mention holy poverty and the enclosure which would be infringed upon.41

Earlier that same month, Scholastica Kerst had written to the new prioress of Atchison, Theresa Moser, referring to the congregational project as “a laughing stock of the communities in the East.”42 And still earlier, Luitgard Huber of Chicago, in a letter to Scholastica Kerst dated March 20, 1881, asserted that “as it [congregation] is now planned we do not wish it. As I now know better, if this union should leave us as the new associations [apostolic congregations] and leave nothing to us as distinctive Benedictines, then I want nothing to do with it.”43

The question of how extensively the 1880 draft of the Constitution of St. Scholastica was used in houses of Benedictine women after the 1881 Chicago meeting, is outside the scope of this chapter. However, it is important to note that several communities used a nearly identical or modified version of it. For instance, the archives in Covington, KY, have preserved a handwritten copy of the Constitution of St. Scholastica, dated May 14, 1878, approved by Bishop Fink of the Diocese of Leavenworth, and thought to be in the handwriting of Walburga Saelinger.44 Curiously, the community in Erie, PA, had Bishop Fink’s draft printed and hardbound as early as December 7, 1880. It was published under the title, Constitutions of the Benedictine Sisters, Erie, Pa, and documented the approval of Tobias Mullen, Bishop of Erie.45 The first constitution with episcopal approval to be used by the community in St. Joseph, MN, was a handwritten revision of Bishop Fink’s 1880 draft.46 When the Prioress, Scholastica Kerst, began to see no hope for the formation of a congregation of American Benedictine women, she took up the task of revising the old Eichstätt statutes and customs of her house in order to assure its autonomy. It was “to bring the constitutions and customs of her house more in line with the document prepared by Bishop Fink that Mother Scholastica drew up a new body of rules. It differed from that of the congregation only in respect to the period of candidature, term of office for the prioress, and membership in chapter. To this document Bishop Seidenbusch gave his approval on April 21, 1887...”47

The real significance of the 1880 Constitution for this study lies not in how it may have been used in the years following 1881,
but rather in its use as a frame of reference, or perhaps as a reflec-
tor of the change and adaptation experienced by Benedictine
women in America between the years 1852 and 1881. Given
Bishop Fink's close association with communities of Benedictine
women for twenty years or more of that time period, it can be
safely assumed that the document reflected the general practices
and tradition with which the women of the various communities
were familiar. In the following sections of this chapter, highlights
of the early way of life according to the Rule of Benedict among
women in America will be discussed. An analysis of their way of
life as they attempted to transplant the tradition and observances
articulated in the 1846 Eichstatt constitution during the three de-
cades before the first American constitution, will yield at least
some preliminary insights into how that way of life was reshaped
within the context of nineteenth-century America.

**Benedictine Vowing**

The question of solemn versus simple vows for Benedictine
women in nineteenth-century America is extremely complex and
difficult to unravel. The root of the problem reached back over
centuries of evolving church law for women religious which was
often ambiguous, inconsistent, and sometimes even contradictory.
No official collection of ecclesiastical law existed between the first
enunciation of regulations to be followed by all religious women
in Boniface VIII's bull, Periculoso, issued in 1298, and the 1917
Code of Canon Law. Consequently, "to clarify a point of law, one
had to consult an immense number of works and to deal with or-
dinances that were contradictory, some of which had been re-
pealed, and others which had become obsolete through long
disuse."48 The situation in nineteenth-century America was fur-
ther complicated by the mission status of the Roman Catholic
Church, which held it under the jurisdiction of the Roman Con-
gregation, Propaganda Fide, rather than general church law.

Evolving church law related to the vows of women religious
over the centuries had an ambiguous affect on the tradition
of vowing among Benedictine women. On the one hand, ecclesi-
astical law affecting the vows of women religious drew its root
inspiration from the ancient tradition of monastic vowing. On the other hand, it effected the eventual reformulation of the monastic vow tradition of stability, conversion and obedience, into the prescriptive formula of poverty, chastity and obedience. While male Benedictines were neither directly affected by this reformulation of vow taking, nor the distinction of simple versus solemn vows which resulted from the imposition of enclosure upon women religious in 1298, Benedictine women were saddled with the resultant ambiguities until the distinction was abolished in the Revised Code of Canon Law in 1983.49

For centuries in the early church there was no organized form of religious life or ecclesiastical law to regulate and institutionalize it. Benedict of Nursia, however, in his sixth-century Rule, recognized the importance of a stable and permanent commitment on the part of his community members, and prescribed the ritual of promise laid down in chapter 58:17-23.

When he [the newcomer] is to be received, he comes before the whole community in the oratory and promises stability, fidelity to monastic life, and obedience [promittat de stabilitate sua et conversatione morum suorum et, obedientia].... He states his promise in a document drawn up in the name of the saints whose relics are there, and of the abbot, who is present. The novice writes out this document himself... and with his own hand lays it on the altar.50

Although the above formula of promise was not perceived in the juridical sense of vowing until centuries later, these “vows” characterized the monastic or religious life for several hundred years following Benedict. A permanent commitment to a monastic community presupposed celibate chastity, and the monastic life style assumed a basic poverty expressed in the common ownership of material goods.

In time, as abuses crept in and new forms of religious life evolved, reformers became more concerned with the explicit statement of poverty and chastity. The vow triad of poverty, chastity and obedience, which came to be used consistently in ecclesiastical law, was first used in the twelfth century by the Hermits of St. Augustine.51 Benedictines, however, continued to profess their vows according to the monastic formula of stability, conversion and obedience, while the formula of poverty, chastity and obedience became the distinguishing feature of apostolic congregations.

In the earlier ages of the church all vows were “simple.” The form of vows called “solemn” was a later introduction by Boniface
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VIII (1294–1303). Essentially, the “solemnity” of vows was a legal designation guaranteeing the ecclesiastical approval of “profession in some Religious Order approved by the Holy See.” The solemn vow was aimed at correcting abuses in the practice of poverty and chastity in particular, and eventually came to be defined as “rendering the person who takes such vows not only forever and unchangeably incapable of marriage, but also of exercising dominion over property, whether by acquiring or retaining it.” The real ground of distinction between solemn and simple vows was to be found in the disposition of ecclesiastical law which attached outward conditions to solemn vows. As to their “interior substance, force and obligation” there was no difference. A simple vow did not “bind less before God than a solemn vow. The only distinction between them is in the solemnity, which arises, not from the inward force and virtue of the vow, but from the external conditions attached to it by the Church.”

From the thirteenth century onward, the Church had forbidden the formation of any new religious orders with solemn vows. Nevertheless, new groups continued to form, and after the Council of Trent, in an attempt to stop once and for all the proliferation of new types of religious, Pius V (1566–1572) banned all religious communities in which solemn vows were not made. The ban was ineffective, for communities which did not have solemn vows and strict enclosure continued to exist despite Circa Pastoralis. These communities were dependent on local bishops and were tacitly tolerated by Rome due to the good works they performed. Eventually, these new groups attained a degree of approval with the permission to profess “simple” vows. In Quamvis Justo of 1749, Benedict XIV granted religious congregations without solemn vows and strict enclosure legitimate and juridical existence, but withheld the designation of “true religious” because they lacked the solemn vows technically required for full and official status within the Roman Church.

Because the concept of solemn vows and strict enclosure had become so inextricably intertwined throughout the centuries, and because the women at St. Walburg Convent in Eichstatt had taken up the external work of education after the period of secularization ended in 1835, the Konstitutionen of 1846 placed them under simple perpetual vows, at least technically. Practically, however, their status within the formal structure of the Church remained at best ambiguous. When Abbess Augustina Weihermüller of Eichstatt (1950–1985) visited St. Benedict’s Convent in St. Joseph,
MN, in 1952, she spoke about the post-secularization era of their history.

Before the secularization of 1806–1835, [we] were a strictly cloistered abbey, having solemn vows, consecration of virgins, and papal status. When the convent was re-established in 1835, [we] were placed under the Bishop with simple perpetual vows but were granted all the privileges the convent had previously enjoyed as an abbey. . . .

“Simple perpetual vows” in nineteenth-century Church policy and practice meant the profession of poverty, chastity and obedience. Although Bishop von Reisach of Eichstätt had been concerned about fidelity to the Rule of Benedict in drafting the post-secularization constitution for the women of St. Walburg Convent, he omitted any discussion related to the monastic tradition of vowing stability, conversion, and obedience. Whether this omission occurred because of unfamiliarity with monastic practice, or because of Church policy of the time, cannot be known.

Bishop von Reisach’s treatment of the vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity in the first three chapters of the 1846 Konstitutionen, was thorough and precise in its practical applications. His reference to chapter 5 of the Rule of Benedict in the opening sentence on obedience testifies to his regard for the central place of this virtue in Benedictine life. Furthermore, the entire chapter reflects a firm understanding of Benedict’s teaching on obedience, capturing 1) the ideal of “unhesitating obedience which comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all” (RB 5:1–5), 2) the motivation of love behind the choice of the “narrow road that leads to life” (RB 5:10–11), 3) the admonition to obey in freedom, simplicity of heart, and gladness (RB 5:14–16), and 4) the conviction that “obedience shown to superiors is given to God” (RB 5:15). An understanding of the integral connection between obedience and humility in Benedict’s vision is evidenced by frequent reference to RB 7 on humility. Additional references to RB 49, 68, and 71 elaborate the role of obedience in attitudes toward asceticism, work, and mutual love.

Five of the twelve paragraphs in chapter two on the vow of poverty contain explicit references to the teachings of Benedict on private ownership, distribution of goods, and the utensils of the monastery. The opening paragraph itself paraphrases key texts from RB 33–35.

The Holy Father Benedict says in chapter 33 of the Holy Rule that no one should have anything as his own, anything whatever, even the smallest thing, whether books, tablets, or a slate, a pencil to write—
in fact nothing, since they are not allowed even to have free disposal of their own bodies and wills. St. Benedict considers it the greatest evil for one of his disciples to possess property or to act as though he were the owner. St. Benedict wants this evil to be immediately removed and uprooted from his monasteries.\textsuperscript{58}

Two other important emphases of Benedict are highlighted in paragraphs five and six—the values of common ownership and distribution of goods according to need.

The Holy Father Benedict says there will not be a perfect common life in his monasteries unless all have everything in common.\ldots The superior should remind herself that it is the explicit wish of her Holy Father Benedict that all that is needed should be provided by the superior: 'In order that the vice of private ownership may be cut out by the roots and all pretext of need may be taken away' [RB 33:1]. She should always keep in mind the sentence from the Acts of the Apostles, 'distribution was made to each according as anyone had need,' [RB 34:1] and especially consider the weakness of the needy.\textsuperscript{59}

Further references to the receiving of gifts (RB 54), care of the sick (RB 36), and regard for the goods of the monastery (RB 32), point to the Konstitutionen’s close correlation with the teaching of Benedict on the vow of poverty.

It is apparent that the author of the 1846 statutes had only indirect references to chastity in the Rule of Benedict to work with in the chapter entitled, "The Vow of Chastity, Spiritual Discipline and Modesty."\textsuperscript{60} The general content of the chapter encourages the discipline of the senses, interior and exterior modesty, and the avoidance of particular friendships. The teaching of Benedict is reflected in the admonition to be chaste, both in body and soul, so as “to love God more and more, to cling to Him, and to prefer nothing to him [RB 4:21 and 72:11].\ldots Their first concern should be to walk constantly in the presence of God and to devote themselves to fervent prayer [RB 4:48–49, 56].\ldots Then all their thoughts, affections and inclinations, their words, acts and gestures, will be pure in the eyes of God."\textsuperscript{61} Other themes of the Rule, such as loving in “sincerity and humility of heart” (RB 72), walking in humility with “heads bowed and their eyes toward the ground” (RB 7:63), and avoiding contentious and inappropriate laughter (RB 7:59–60), are skillfully woven into the prescriptions relating to the vow of chastity.

It is somewhat surprising to find that the only reference to the distinctively Benedictine vow of conversatio morum is contained in the Konstitutionen's chapter on chastity.


Because the Holy Father Benedict expects of all his disciples that they promise the conversion of morals, it is not enough for sisters to concentrate only on the interior life. They should also behave exteriorly in such a way that nothing may be found that would displease God and would give scandal to others. They should strive in all circumstances to observe and show a perfect and holy reserve, unaffected modesty, and humble respectability.

While coming somewhat close to the biblical concept of integrity of heart, or *meta-noia*, this allusion to "conversion of morals" clearly misses the specifically monastic understanding of the vow, and its integral relationship to the Benedictine promise of stability in the monastery until death (RB, Prologue 45-50).

The other distinctively Benedictine vow of *stabilitas* is nowhere discussed in the statues of 1846. It appears that stability was assumed in the document, probably covered by the prescriptions surrounding the rule of enclosure laid down in chapter twelve. Unfortunately, the richness of Benedict’s teaching on stability as a condition of the heart, as perseverance in the monastic way of life, was lost in the minutiae of exactly who and precisely when persons could leave or come into the cloister. Rather than holding any spiritual meaning in itself, enclosure or stability was viewed as the “perfect safeguard for helping to observe the religious virtues, the religious spirit, as well as to further the discipline and order in the community.”

It is striking, in view of the above treatment of the vows in the 1846 statutes, that the monastic formula of profession was not forever lost to the Benedictine women of St. Walburg’s in Eichstatt. In practice, their solution to the Church’s requirement of the simple perpetual vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, was to name the monastic vows as well in the profession formula. As early as July 9, 1846, Benedicta Riepp professed her vows in a formula promising “stability, conversion of my morals, obedience, poverty and chastity, for three years, according to the Rule of St. Benedict and the statutes of this monastery.” This was the vow tradition she brought to America, and the earliest, most primitive vow documents preserved in American houses testify to this fivefold articulation of Benedictine vowing during the pioneer period.

The question concerning what kind of vows sisters in America should be allowed to take was problematic at least twenty years before the first Benedictine women came to America. The issue of enclosure was consistently at the heart of the
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problem. Circumstances in America made it impossible for women religious to observe the rule of enclosure, a requirement for women under solemn vows. In spite of these circumstances, however, several bishops and superiors of women petitioned Rome to allow sisters in America to profess solemn vows. Rome refused the privilege during the 1840's and 1850's, recognizing that "many bishops wished sisters to staff schools in their dioceses, and cloistral prescriptions would make this difficult; also, rules forbidding entry to the cloister were repugnant to many non-Catholics, who wanted civil authorities to have access to convents, to keep sisters from being held in them against their will." 65

The continuing debate over solemn versus simple vows for American sisters heated up between the American bishops and Rome between 1857 and 1864. Abbot Boniface Wimmer, aware of the dialogue occurring between the bishops and the Holy See, petitioned Rome in 1858 to allow Benedictine women in America to retain the tradition of solemn vows without maintaining strict enclosure. 66 A reply from Cardinal Barnabo of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, dated November 11, 1858, pointed out the complexity of the issue, and determined that the question concerning vows could not be separated from his ongoing controversy with Benedicta Riepp.

... since the question concerning the quality of the vows which may be pronounced by nuns in the United States of North America is now pending, having been brought up in the business before the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, for that reason I thought that the controversy, which has arisen between you and Sister Riepp, should not be separated from the weighty matter (of vows). 67

While the American Church waited for an answer on the question of vows, Boniface Wimmer continued to receive, presumably, the "solemn" vows of women at St. Marys, Erie and Newark. Aware, however, of the precarious validity of these vows, he commented on the situation to Adelgunda Leschall of Newark who had requested a dispensation from her vows.

... all vows of the Sisters of all Orders in this country will likely be declared invalid because the Convent has no legal foundations, and the civil authority does not recognize the Religious as a society, and for that reason the solemn vows will become simple vows. From these then, the bishop or the superior of the Order, who receives from the Pope the power to do so can then dispense one from them. As soon as the official notice comes to me from Rome, you may leave without hindrance. 68
Because the question of solemn vows for Benedictine women in America became part of the larger issue of their canonical status and jurisdiction, a decision regarding the nature of their vows was delivered from the Roman Congregation long before a decision was reached that would affect all women religious in the American Church. The Roman Decree of 1859 approved the foundation of St. Marys, Erie and Newark as priories “with profession of simple vows.”

Five years later, in the fall of 1864, the question regarding the vows of American sisters which had been debated for twenty years was answered by a decree from the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars. The decree stated that the nuns in five American Visitandine convents could take solemn vows, but all other sisters in America would be bound by simple vows.

At the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1866, the American bishops reiterated the 1864 Roman decree, specifying that the vows of all sisters in convents already established were to be regarded as simple, except where a rescript from the Holy See granted solemn vows. In all convents to be founded thereafter, the vows would always be simple. The bishops further explained that simple vows were perpetually binding, and differed from solemn vows in two ways: 1) they did not entail strict enclosure, and 2) they did not incapacitate women religious from personally holding property.

In the same year, Boniface Wimmer received another communication from Cardinal Barnabo related to various issues concerning the monasteries and convents he had established. Item fourteen of the letter prescribed that the custom already observed in houses of Benedictine women should be continued, namely, that “after the novitiate, in the religious profession, they make simple vows for three years and then after the expiration of this time, they make simple vows for life.”

An analysis of vow documents articulating the commitment of sixty-two Benedictine women in America, between the years 1854 and 1888, testifies to what was being done in practice while the Roman Catholic hierarchy was preoccupied with the canonical status of their commitments. In general, the monastic tradition of vowing stability, conversion and obedience was in place among Benedictine women in America. Thirty-three of the documents named these three only, and twenty-six added poverty and chastity to the monastic triad. Only three of the documents examined used the formula of poverty, chastity and obedience, omitting stability and conversion.
All of the documents, including the above three, indicate that the vows expressed were being promised “according to the Rule of our Holy Father Benedict,” and only four of them did not make some reference to statutes. The usual reference was to “our statutes” or “the statutes of this monastery.” The difficulty, of course, is the question of exactly what statutes were being used between 1852 and 1881. It is probable that in most cases the references were to the Eichstätt statutes which, it seems, were being adapted as much as possible by the superiors of the new foundations. However, a curious reference appeared in the vow documents of women who made their profession at St. Marys, PA, and Erie, PA, in 1858 and 1859. Seven documents indicated that vows were being professed according to the “statutes of the Bavarian Benedictine Congregation.” An explanation of these occurrences can only be conjectured. Both of these houses were geographically in close proximity to Abbot Wimmer’s monastery at Latrobe, PA, and 1858 was the year in which Rome had declared him Abbot President of the American branch of the Bavarian Cassinese Congregation. At this point in time, the controversy between Wimmer and Benedicta Riepp over the issue of jurisdiction was at its height, so it is possible that the Abbot prescribed this clause as a way of claiming his jurisdiction over the women, which he presumptuously believed belonged to him.

An even more unusual prescription was added to a significant number of vow documents during these same years. After the usual formula of vows, a final sentence read: “and I promise also that I will be available to assist in any founding of a new Convent of our Congregation and will accept any work given me as often as my superiors find it plausible to send me.” This sentence, with slight variations, appeared in nineteen documents, a practice begun at St. Marys, PA, and Erie in 1858. It occurred in both triennial and perpetual vow documents and continued into the 1870’s. Both daughterhouses founded by Erie—Covington, KY, and Chicago—adopted the same clause, sometimes in a variant version: “I also promise that wherever I am sent to found a new house and whatever works I perform will be done by the command and permission of the Most Reverend President of the American Benedictine Congregation.” It is surprising that this practice lasted into the 1870’s, in view of the Roman Decree of 1859, which limited Abbot Wimmer’s jurisdiction over women in America.
Other aspects of the vow documents analyzed evidence widespread diversity of practice. At least twelve documents bear no date, and fifteen are lacking the name of a presiding prelate. All but four vow statements name the prioress of the house, and twenty of these name both the prioress and Abbot Boniface Wimmer. In the absence of Abbot Wimmer, other documents name bishops, priors or confessors as presiding prelates. Forty-nine of the documents are handwritten in Latin, twelve in German, and one in English.

The area of diversity which evidences the most inconsistencies in understanding and practice, concerns the type of vows professed and the duration of them. For thirteen women in this vow document study, there are extant documents for both first and final profession. Seven of them specify \textit{ad triennium} at the time of first profession, but their final documents indicate neither \textquotedblleft simple perpetual\textquotedblright{} nor specify \textquotedblleft forever\textquotedblright{}. Six of the women’s documents specify no duration for either first or final vows, but are distinguishable by affixed dates.

The tradition transplanted from Eichstatt assumed that Benedictine women in America would also profess first or temporary vows \textit{in tres annos}, followed by final or \textit{vota solemnia}. As observed earlier, however, due to the need for professed members to teach in schools, some women may have professed their vows only once and permanently. And after the decision in 1864 that all sisters in America would be allowed to profess only simple perpetual vows, exactly how the terminology of \textquotedblleft simple\textquotedblright{} and \textquotedblleft perpetual\textquotedblright{} was understood by Benedictines is inconsistent and unclear. In some instances, \textquotedblleft simple\textquotedblright{} was understood as a reference to temporary vows, and \textquotedblleft perpetual\textquotedblright{} described final vows. In the annals of one community during the 1870’s, \textquotedblleft simple\textquotedblright{} designated first vows, and \textquotedblleft solemn\textquotedblright{} continued in use as the designation for final vows. An historian of the Fort Smith, AR, community, reflecting on the practice in that house in the 1880’s, explained that \textquotedblleft if here and later we speak of solemn vows, we mean the simple perpetual vows in contrast to the temporary which are made for a certain number of years as so many new religious communities are doing.\textquotedblright{}

In view of such diverse usage and understanding, it is not surprising that early in the 1870’s Boniface Wimmer began questioning the validity of some profession ceremonies. In a letter dated November 15, 1872, Bishop Fink of Leavenworth,
presumably writing to Evangelista Kremmeter, Prioress of the Atchison community, asked: "What Sisters’ vows did Right Rev. Abbot say to be invalid? And what reason did he give for his opinion?" Her answer is not extant, but the archives of that house preserved a second vow document of Clara Bradley, the last paragraph of which read as follows:

This profession of religious vows I have made and in the present do make in case of any defect in my profession I have made on the 10th of February, 1867. In testimony whereof I have signed this with my own hand in the Chapel of St. Scholastica’s Convent this ninth day of February in the year of Our Lord, 1873, on Septuagesima Sunday in the City of Atchison, Kansas.

Further evidence that some sisters were required to retake their vows is found in the chronicles of the St. Joseph, MN, community. Since the early vow formulas had not mentioned the nature or duration of vows professed, "the sisters were advised to make perpetual vows, and Father Cornelius received these in 1870 but no mention is made by whose authority he did so."

From the confusion reflected in the practice of Benedictine vowing between the years 1859 and 1880, one trend emerges with clarity. The designation, vota solemnia, used in the documents of the first and only Benedictine women ever to profess solemn vows in America, in 1857, disappeared after the Roman Decree of 1859, and the terms vota simplicae and pervota perpetua do not appear in documents until after 1880. In that year the Constitution specified that the "two kinds of vows" for Benedictine women in America were to be those professed "for three years," and "their last vows, which are perpetual or for life, although they are only the simple vows."

There is a sense in which the Constitution of 1880 can be interpreted as having reclaimed for Benedictine women in America a clearer articulation of the distinctively Benedictine vows of conversion, stability and obedience. Whereas the first three chapters of the 1846 Konstitutionen had specified only the vows of obedience, poverty and chastity, chapter nine of the American statutes prescribed that "the vows for the daughters of St. Benedict are five: Stability, Poverty, Chastity, Obedience and Conversion of Morals."

Unlike the Eichstätt statutes which had not used the term "stability" at all, the 1880 Constitution defined this uniquely Benedictine vow as follows:
By means of this vow the sisters attach themselves to and become members of the particular community for which they make their profession, and are entitled to all the privileges which membership confers. No sister can attach herself to any other community without the will of the Prioress and the consent of the Rt. Rvd. Ordinary.85

The importance of the vow was further highlighted by spelling out in detail how “for grave reasons the vow of stability may be transferred to some other community with the consent of the chapter and of the Bishop.”86

The meaning of the vow of stability and enclosure was clearly conditioned by the early American experience of rapidly developing independent foundations, and the entirely new phenomenon of “depending” or “branch houses.”87 By 1880, in view of the establishment of fifteen independent communities of Benedictine women, it was necessary to shape some legislation regarding the permanency of commitment to a sister’s community of profession.88 Many women, either by order of Boniface Wimmer or bishops or their own religious superiors, had taken up residence in as many as three or four houses within the founding period alone.

In a rather lengthy chapter of its own, and separate from the discussion of the vows, the 1880 Constitution incorporated a radically new definition of enclosure, again taking into account what had been the lived experience of Benedictine women during their founding and expansion years. The opening paragraph asserted the following:

Although there is no enclosure in the strict sense of the church for the Sisters of St. Benedict in this country, yet there is the enclosure imposed upon them by reason of their forming a religious community and leading a community life under religious obedience. . . . 89

Although this statement is followed by fourteen items90 detailing the limited extent of the members’ comings and goings outside the enclosure, the above assertion captured, if only implicitly, the integral connection between the three traditionally Benedictine vows. Assuming the necessity of stability for the keeping of this newly formulated rule of enclosure, the phrases “forming a religious community” and “leading a community life” articulated the essential meaning of monastic conversion in a community of obedience. In one succinct sentence in the earlier chapter on vows, the Constitution had gone right to the heart of the traditional understanding of Benedictine conversatio, embracing the essential nuance of fidelity to the Rule, as well as the New Testament
meaning of conversion as taught by Paul: “The vow of conversion of morals expresses the obligation to strive earnestly after sanctification by a faithful compliance with the Holy Rule according to the words of the Apostle: ‘And I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me’ (Gal. 2:20).”

Regarding the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, the Constitution of 1880 departed little from the understanding of these vows as articulated in the 1846 Eichstatt statutes. The essence of Benedictine poverty, that “according to the Holy Rule no sister is to consider anything as her property,” undergirded the specific prescriptions in paragraphs eight through thirteen of chapter nine. The only item that directly reflected the American experience was the expectation that “all the proceeds of the branch houses after deducting the necessary expenses of living are to be turned over to the motherhouse to be applied for the benefit of the community.”

One paragraph on the vow of chastity focused exclusively on the avoidance of particular friendships, and obedience was to be “rendered by the sisters to the Prioress and the superiors in general,” for the sake of God. Obedience, as prescribed by the Rule of Benedict, was for the sanctification of “every work and act of the religious,” at all times. “However, if any think herself unjustly aggrieved beyond endurance she may ask permission to lay her complaint before the Bishop, and if she is refused it, may do so without permission. Until the arrival of his decision she must endeavor faithfully to comply with the obedience enjoined on her by the Prioress.”

A final note from the 1880 chapter on the vows suggests that efforts toward Americanization were well underway by the end of the expansion period. “The sisters shall ordinarily make their vows in English, and renew them at the proper time in like manner.”

The Cenobitic Life

An entire chapter could be written on the topic of the cenobitic life as prescribed in the Rule of Benedict, for the traditional notion of cenobitism includes every aspect in the life of persons “who
belong to a monastery, where they serve under a rule and an abbot. However, limited by the scope and purpose of this chapter, the discussion will focus on four areas that further the goal of analyzing how the Benedictine tradition among women was reshaped by American circumstances: Benedictine organization, authority and governance, acceptance and formation of new members, and the common life.

Benedictine Organization

One centennial historian said it well when she remarked that “the whole organization of Benedictine convents had to be worked out not in words so much as in peoples’ lives.” The story reconstructed in the previous chapters of this book is more than adequate testimony to the truth of her statement. Although Benedicta Riepp hoped that the convents established in America would be governed by St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt, the Benedictine tradition of autonomy of individual houses was written into the American pattern as early as 1859, when the first five foundations of Benedictine women were separated from the Bavarian motherhouse. During the two succeeding decades, the pattern continued with astonishing results.

The establishment of a new independent foundation was not always the clear intent and goal when a group of Benedictine women left the house of their profession to respond to the need for teachers in a particular parish school. As a result, the greatest innovation of the expansion era was the emergence of “depending houses” or “branch houses,” a unique American expression of Benedictine cenobitic monasticism. Although the 1846 Eichstätt constitution had extended the enclosure to include the school on the convent premises, it was unthinkable that sisters would live anywhere else but at St. Walburg’s. However, thirty-three years later in America, Benedictine women were residing not only in fifteen independent houses, but also in approximately twenty-six branch houses in the vicinity of the parish schools in which they were teaching. A twofold pattern is discernible in the evolution of this unique American phenomenon.

When the first American daughterhouses were founded from St. Marys, PA, in Erie, Newark, St. Cloud, and Covington, it was
in response to a need for sisters to teach in parish schools being established in these places. Almost immediately upon the arrival of a group in these parishes, the need for more personnel dictated the reception of candidates and the establishment of a novitiate. For instance, the St. Cloud and Newark houses received novices as early as three and four months, respectively, after their arrival. This pattern took hold immediately and continued in the American experience.

Before long, granddaughter houses emerged, as was the case in the founding of Covington, KY, from Erie in 1859. The centennial historian of Erie described the ongoing process in this way: "... as soon as the community had increased to the point where the nuns could teach without overcrowding their day, a call came to them to thin out the membership again."101

Alongside the development of independent houses, another pattern began to emerge, that of assigning sisters to live and work in a particular parish setting without the expectation of opening a novitiate and becoming independent. The earliest instance of what later came to be called a "dependent," "branch" house or a "parish mission," seems to have originated in 1862. The earliest chronicle of the St. Cloud community reported that "in the fall of 1862 the mission of St. Joseph [Clinton, MN] was founded by three sisters: Evangelista Kremmeter, Dominica Massoth, and Boniface Bantle."102 Two years later, the Newark house experienced "the opening of the community's first mission" in Elizabeth, NJ.103 In 1874, the community in Chicago sent sisters to Nauvoo, IL, "to establish a high school for young ladies." During the first years of the Academy's existence, "the Sisters assigned to Nauvoo were members of St. Scholastica Convent, Chicago, and were appointed to Nauvoo by the superior there."104 It is true that these three houses did eventually become independent. In the interim, however, sisters lived and worked in these places "on assignment."

It is not always possible to discern why some branch houses eventually became independent and others remained dependent. When the Nauvoo community became independent on April 12, 1879, it was the result of a corporate decision.

It was resolved that the Benedictine Sisters at Nauvoo, Ill., formerly belonging to the House of Chicago are to be regarded as an independent community for itself. All responsibility for the financial affairs of said community shall cease for us from this date.105
When on August 3, 1867, the community in Covington, KY, decided to send sisters to Ferdinand, IN, the minutes signed by Alexia Lechner, Prioress, and Evangelista Pfrangle, Secretary, reported that Ferdinand would be “accepted as a new mission with the intention of making it independent as soon as they have a sufficient number of members.”

Five years later, on January 21, 1871, two of the women who had founded the community in Ferdinand professed their perpetual vows. A week later, the pastor of the parish in which they were working wrote to the Dean of his monastery in Einsiedeln, Switzerland, concerning the question of independence for the convent.

... I have so arranged matters that neither St. Meinrad nor Einsiedeln are responsible for this foundation. The institution is directly under the Bishop. He appoints the Confessors, the Extraordinary, and the Visitor. Everything is in such perfect order in this convent that the Bishop after having examined it personally, gladly accepted the Convent as a diocesan foundation.

Final separation from the motherhouse in Covington occurred in May of 1871, and in 1872 the community in Ferdinand held its first canonical election of prioress.

Some branch houses suffered painful separations from their motherhouses and sometimes independence was premature. On August 30, 1870, the community at Covington, KY, approved the establishment of another dependent house, this time in New Orleans, “a new field of labor.” “Nine sisters will leave for their new home on October 24, 1870.” Within six years of that departure, a financial dispute between the Covington Prioress and the sisters of the Convent of the Holy Family at Holy Trinity Church in New Orleans resulted in a bitter impasse. When the Prioress failed to grant the sisters permission to purchase property of their choice, “the sisters refused to listen.”

Venerable Mother could not be agreeable to this importunity and by letter reminded them of the obedience they owed to their superior and that they either had to obey or they could no longer expect that she should any longer be responsible for them. They then, one and all, declared themselves separated from here, bought the house, elected their prioress, and since then have ignored their motherhouse, St. Walburg.

Practical considerations often led to the independence of branch houses, as was the case with the Shoal Creek/Fort Smith,
AR, community founded from Ferdinand, IN, in 1878. One of the early historians of that foundation observed the following:

In every respect the Rev. Mother tried to do everything piously the way it was done at the Motherhouse. However, in the long run it was not possible to do so for the very reason that things in a given circumstance should be given consideration. The heat of the climate in the South, the quick growing convent, and the many necessary building changes because of it, the all too great distance from the Motherhouse, all these brought great unpleasantness and delays with them.¹¹⁰

Before the lapse of ten years, the sisters in the Arkansas “dependent daughter” pleaded to elect their own superior with all the rights of independence attached. They were granted the privilege, and “at the canonical erection of St. Scholastica’s as a Diocesan Motherhouse, Mother Meinrada [Lex] was elected the first superior of the Convent, May 20, 1887.”¹¹¹

The Benedictine communities in the East were slower to establish dependent branch houses. Scholastica Burkhard, Prioress of Erie, held out against this innovation for a long time. Her insistence that the rule of enclosure be observed, motivated her several refusals to allow sisters to teach in parish schools across the city. Eventually, the pressure from Erie’s bishop became too great to withstand. When the pastor of the parish in Oil City, PA, requested sisters to teach in his school in 1875, the Prioress determined that “the acceptance of his invitation was prohibitive, as it would involve residence outside the motherhouse.”¹¹² The Erie historians report the outcome of this dilemma with an interesting interpretation.

Bishop Mullen, who had greatly admired the work of the Benedictines, prevailed upon Mother Scholastica to compromise the rule of enclosure to the obvious demands of education. He persuaded her to convert her cloister into a convent home of an active community who would assume teaching obligations in the surrounding parishes.¹¹³

The original American motherhouse in St. Marys, PA, was also reluctant to establish branch houses due to the rule of enclosure. However, by 1876 the community had sent three choir sisters and three lay sisters to each of three little towns in the Diocese of Erie, and spoke of them as being “employed there.”¹¹⁴

Major events in American Catholicism at the time serve to explain why Benedictine women seemed to have no other choice than to innovate. The pattern of establishing branch houses took
off and developed rapidly after 1866. Ten years earlier, the First Plenary Council of Baltimore determined to establish schools in connection with the churches of their dioceses. In 1866, the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore decreed that every pastor "under pain of mortal sin" was to provide a Catholic school in any parish or congregation subject to him. Therefore, as pastors scrambled to carry out this decree in the succeeding decades, Benedictine women too, were swept up into the early formation of the American Catholic school system. The first comprehensive catalogue of Benedictine women in America, printed at St. Vincent's in Latrobe in 1879, listed twenty-six "depending houses" under the auspices of nine of the fifteen then-existing independent foundations.

The phenomenon of branch houses had become so widespread that by the time the American constitution was drafted and reviewed by Benedictine women in Chicago in 1880, the innovation was addressed as a normative matter. The 1880 Constitution included two norms:

No motherhouse shall establish any branch houses unless the necessary number of sisters can be spared, and the Bishops of the dioceses in which the motherhouse is located and the branch house shall be established, had given their consent.

No branch house shall in the future be made a motherhouse except by a majority of the votes of the general chapter and the consent of the bishop in whose diocese the respective branch house is located and unless such houses have twelve sisters belonging to it that have made perpetual vows.

Twenty years beyond these norms, at the turn of the century, this unique development of Benedictinism among women in America was articulated as follows in the Catalogue of the Order.

Since parochial schools have been generally organized, the sisters, instead of starting new communities, establish branch houses (or missions) in small towns or congregations, teach the children there during the scholastic year, usually September until June. They mostly spend vacation at the motherhouse to which they belong, and like the migratory swallow, leave as September approaches, not indeed for the sunshine like their feathered fellow-traveler, but for a year's hard work in the school room.
Authority and Governance

While the *Konstitutionen* of 1846 was completely silent on the topic of authority and governance (apart from the chapter on obedience), the 1880 *Constitution* began on that note in great detail. The first seven chapters were devoted to the topic, spelling out precisely the form of government to be enacted, the rights and duties of the Prioress, Chapter and officials, the qualities of candidates for Prioress and the other offices, and prescriptions for the preparation for an election of a Prioress. Approximately one third of the document was devoted to issues of authority and governance, a fact that might be explained within the historical context of the Roman Church and American constitutional practices.

By 1870, the year of Vatican Council I, Rome was beginning to call for the constitutions of communities of women with simple vows and subject to episcopal jurisdiction. Experience had shown over many years that certain provisions were necessary if these communities were to prosper, especially in the area of “a clear line of demarcation between the authority of the bishop and that of the religious superiors.” American Benedictine women, as has been observed throughout this study, were especially vulnerable in this regard. In addition to bishops, they had to reckon also with abbots and priors who frequently acted as self-appointed “protectors” of their communities. It is quite clear also from the 1880 Constitution that in addition to reflecting Church custom and practice, the document emulated America’s style of constitutional government, framing the ancient tradition of Benedictine governance in sometimes bureaucratic terminology.

In the 1846 Eichstatt statutes episcopal jurisdiction was assumed, for that had been the unbroken tradition of St. Walburg Convent since 1035. That tradition continued for Benedictine women in America after the Roman decree of 1859. Under the jurisdiction of the local bishop, the Prioress governed her community according to the *Rule of Benedict* and the prescribed constitutions or statutes. The 1880 *Constitution*, unlike the earlier Eichstädt statutes, carefully spelled out the areas in which the bishop’s authority was supreme: 1) the admission of candidates into the novitiate and for profession of vows, 2) the dismissal of professed women from the community and the dispensation of vows, 3) the accepting of new missions, or the establishing of branch houses, 4) the buying and selling of real estate, 5) the
contracting of debts payable within a year or two, 6) improve-
ments on buildings or premises requiring indebtedness for one or
two years, and 7) other matters reserved to the Bishop of a diocese
by the sacred canons of the church.\textsuperscript{122}

As had been the custom in the Bavarian Benedictine tradition,
the Prioresses in America held the authority to appoint the other
officials of the house—the Subprioress, Treasurer, Secretary and
Procuratrix. In addition to these appointments, she was respon-
sible for appointing the superiors of the branch houses, and had
the right to “remove them at her discretion.”\textsuperscript{123} A new duty of the
Prioresses in America was that of visiting the branch houses once
a year in order to “examine their spiritual and temporal condi-
tion, and make such arrangements as will bring about the good of
religion and the happiness of the sisters. She shall correct abuses
that may have crept in, and reform any irregularity she may
find.”\textsuperscript{124}

The Benedictine tradition of both men and women had for
centuries embraced the privilege of a collaborative form of gover-
nance. Benedict of Nursia, in the third chapter of his \textit{Rule} legis-
lated that “as often as anything important is to be done in the
monastery, the abbot shall call the whole community together
and himself explain what the business is; and after hearing the
advice of the brothers, let him ponder it and follow what he
judges the wiser course.”\textsuperscript{125} That this valued cenobitic privilege
was preserved intact for the women of St. Walburg’s in Eichstatt
after the period of secularization, is evident from the \textit{Konstitu-
tionen}’s chapters on the admission of candidates. In carefully writ-
ten chapters on the “Scrutinium” and “The Voting Process,”\textsuperscript{126} the
Prioress’ ultimate responsibility was to call the community to-
gether when it was time for a vote. This form of assembly had
been traditionally called the “Chapter,” and required the presence
of all professed members. In Eichstatt, however, the lay sisters
were not allowed to vote. Nevertheless, “for this important act of
voting [all members] should prepare themselves by prayer and
reflection.”\textsuperscript{127}

Chapter three of the 1880 \textit{Constitution} dealt exclusively with
the tradition of community “Chapter,” and in typically American
style spelled out the Chapter’s rights and duties.

To the chapter belong all the sisters who have made perpetual vows.
As often as matters of importance are to be transacted (Holy Rule,
Chap.III) the Prioress shall call the chapter together. To the meetings
of the chapter all the sisters shall be called who belong to the chapter
and who are present at the motherhouse, or who can conveniently
come from the branch houses. 128
The matters subject to the action of the Chapter were nearly iden­
tical to the areas listed above as subject to the Bishop's approval.
One item, "the accepting of bequests or legacies to which onerous
conditions affecting the community are attached," seemed to be
the prerogative of the community only, and the financial outlay of
money to be used for property improvements needed a Chapter
vote if "more than one hundred and fifty dollars during one
year." 129 There was no indication that lay sisters were not allowed
to vote.
Although the American constitution for Benedictine women
delineated the authority of the Prioress and the Chapter, in keep­
ing with a long and cherished tradition, the story reconstructed in
the earlier chapters of this study testifies to the near loss of au­
tonomy and authority in their lived experience during the foun­
dation and expansion years in America. Rather than possessing
the cenobitic rights and privileges of their earlier tradition, it ap­
ppears that Benedictine women spent their first thirty years in this
country reclaiming the authority that rightfully belonged to them
by virtue of the Rule of Benedict. The two areas most affected by
Boniface Wimmer's illusion of jurisdiction over them in the 1850's
and 1860's were 1) the community's privilege and right of electing
their own superior, and 2) the Chapter's role in the screening and
acceptance of candidates seeking entrance into their communi­
ties. 130

The 1846 Eichstatt statutes were silent about the role of the
prioress and the method of her election. Yet, the handing down of
leadership by the community had been an unquestioned compo­
nent of the tradition, even among the "exiled" women during the
period of St. Walburg's secularization. The first couple of decades
in America were a kind of exile in this regard also, for it appears
that from 1852 to 1865 no community held its own election. Supe­
riors were appointed and deposed at whim by abbots and bish­
ops.

How it came about that the community in Newark, NJ, held
an election as early as 1865, or even if it was really a free election,
is not entirely discernible. The newest history of that community
simply reports that Philomena Spiegel "was elected first prioress
of the Newark Community" in August of 1865. 131 The first
daughterhouse of Newark, Elizabeth, NJ, reports that Walburga Hock was "chosen Prioress" in 1868. Whether she was elected by the community or appointed by Philomena Spiegel is unclear. It is interesting, however, to discover that for thirty-six years "she held the office of prioress, being duly re-elected every three years as was the custom until the revision of canon law in 1910."

The next American foundation to exercise its right to elect a prioress did so in 1870. According to a source at St. Scholastica Priory in Chicago, "Mother Theresa Krug was elected prioress by the members of a community which had now become strong enough to constitute a self-governing body."

In some situations it was either an abbot or a bishop who determined the community's readiness for a canonical election. In 1872, the community in Ferdinand, IN, had twelve professed members. In view of this fact, Abbot Martin Marty of St. Meinrad's Abbey "considered the community ready for a canonical election of a Mother Superior. He himself presided at the election, assisted by Fathers Eberhard Stadler and Isidore Hobi. Mother Benedicta [Berns], who had served as Superior five years by appointment, was elected Mother Prioress on the first ballot for a three-year term."

The St. Cloud/St. Joseph community had a difficult time obtaining any kind of abbatial or episcopal approval from the outset. In May of 1875, the neighboring Abbot, Rupert Seidenbusch, who had deposed Willibalda Scherbauer and appointed Antonia Hermann from Chicago in 1868, became Bishop of the Vicariate of Northern Minnesota. In the course of that same year the relationship between the new Bishop and Antonia became increasingly strained. But to her surprise, before the year was up, "Bishop Seidenbusch decided to call for an election of a superior and to preside over it. She was re-elected by the sisters for another three-year term to terminate in 1878."

Apparently, there existed some ambiguity regarding the freedom of the community in this election, because the historical record of the St. Cloud/St. Joseph community indicates that their first free election took place on August 28, 1889, with the election of Aloysia Bath. During his visitation of the community in the spring of that year, Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul sensed "a general desire for a new prioress, for the right of a free election. . . . Up to this time, the convent had never had a free election despite the provisions of its statutes. Abbots or bishops
had appointed the superior. When the motions of an election were made, it was to place in office a sister selected by the bishop."\(^{137}\)

It is a rare occurrence to uncover writings by pioneer Benedictine women themselves, expressing feelings about the events they were experiencing. In one such rare find, Aloysia Bath described her appointment as Prioress in 1877, and her election in 1889.

[In 1877] I was called home [from Minneapolis] to the Convent at St. Joseph, Minn. by Rt. Rev. Bishop Seidenbusch for the burden of the community. [I] arrived here on Feb. 22 at noon, to my greatest sorrow. These three years, one month, and seventeen days were the most unfortunate time in my life. After begging the Bishop several times, my resignation was accepted April 10, 1880, on a Saturday forenoon. . . .

On August 28, 1889, feast of St. Augustine, Most Rev. Archbishop Ireland was here, and O Lord have mercy on my soul and also on the sisters and the community at large, as I had to take the burden of the community once more and that for six years. God was good to me and against all expectations I got through better than I ever thought I would.\(^{138}\)

Occasionally, a community’s first canonical election coincided with the granting of independence from the founding motherhouse. Such was the case for the Richmond/Bristow, VA, community who elected Edith Vogel in 1874, “a choice which was felt to have been directly inspired by the Holy Spirit. . . . She had been directing the affairs of the Richmond convent during the illness and subsequent withdrawal of Mother Bernarda. It was natural, then, that the Sisters should look to her for leadership in the critical days while they were developing all the many necessities of a fully autonomous household."\(^{139}\)

Some of the older houses waited a very long time to hold their first elections. In Erie, PA, Scholastica Burkhard remained the Prioress by appointment from 1856 until her death in 1881.\(^{140}\) At St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, PA, Theresa Vogel, appointed by Boniface Wimmer in 1857, served until 1875 and again from 1878 to 1881.\(^{141}\) On August 10, 1889, the community in Covington, KY, assembled to hold their first canonical election.

After thirty years’ faithful service of Ven. Mother Prioress, Alexia Lechner, as Prioress of St. Walburg’s Monastery—feeble health has induced our Rt. Rev. Bishop Maes to give her the honorary title of
Mother Prioress for life—and to lighten her burden, has convened the Chapter of the above said monastery to elect an Assistant Prioress, who will have all the rights and privileges of the Prioress, according to the Constitutions. The Chapter consisting of thirty-three members—sixteen of whom have active and passive votes—have this day assembled to effect the object in view. The ballots having been cast—Ven. Sr. M.A. Walburga [Saelinger] received the majority of votes. 142

The Bishop of Covington attached his signature to these minutes, with a note in his own handwriting: “I hereby declare M.A. Walburga elected Assistant Prioress and confirm her election.” Walburga Saelinger was re-elected by the community a total of ten times, and served as their Prioress until her death in 1928. For the first sixty-nine years of its history, the Covington community experienced the leadership of only two women—Alexia Lechner, Foundress, and Walburga Saelinger.

Two other foundations of the 1860’s and 1870’s were led by appointed superiors for unusually long terms. Evangelista Kremmeter was the Prioress in Atchison, KS, from 1863 to 1884, and Ottilia Hoeveler led the community in Nauvoo, IL, from the date of its independence in 1879, until 1913. 143

The average span of leadership among the above six prioresses was twenty-eight years. Undoubtedly, the stability of leadership in these early foundations had its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, the long-term leadership of these women must surely have provided an element of security in a way of life that was ever changing and adapting to the exigencies of time and place. On the other hand, resistance to change and authoritarianism were the consequences of long-term leadership in some houses. Whether stability of leadership in these early decades actually facilitated or retarded the process of Americanization is difficult to discern.

With characteristic formality and detail, the American Constitution of 1880 spelled out the qualifications for, and the rights and duties of the Prioress, while the Eichstatt Konstitutionen of 1846 bypassed these topics completely. The qualities required for the “prioress or any of the four highest offices” 144 were fivefold:

a) To be at least thirty years of age.
b) To have made the perpetual vow about ten years before.
c) To have the necessary strength.
d) To be possessed of the necessary educational qualities to superintend the instructions in the academy.
e) To be more or less endowed with the qualifications mentioned in chap. II and LXIV of the Holy Rule.\textsuperscript{145}

Her role as spiritual leader in the community culminated the articulation of twelve “rights and duties” incumbent upon her. Above all, she was to teach rather by example than words, in imitation of our blessed Savior, ‘who began to do and to teach’ (Acts 1); be an example to the whole community by her love of prayer, devotion to her heavenly spouse in the tabernacle; her humility and docility to her ecclesiastical superiors; her obedience and charity; her love of silence; her poverty in dress and furniture in her room.\textsuperscript{146}

The concept of electing a prioress for a term of office was a clear departure from the European tradition of electing abbesses and prioresses for life. The origin of the 1880 prescription to elect a prioress for six years, subject to re-election for “an indefinite number of terms of office,” is obscure.\textsuperscript{147} The Council of Trent had legislated on the “manner of choosing superiors,” but the specific Tridentine concerns were focused on the necessary qualifications for abbesses and prioresses, and their election by secret ballot.\textsuperscript{148} It is probable that the concept of a “term of office” evolved among the many vagaries of canonical legislation for American sisterhoods during the nineteenth century.

The earliest account of the ceremony for the election of a prioress located in this study was that of Meinrada Lex, the first elected prioress of St. Scholastica Convent, Fort Smith, AR. On May 20, 1887, the members of the community gathered in their chapel to hold the election in the presence of the Bishop and the Prior of the nearby monastery of men. Two other monks accompanied, in the capacities of secretary and witness. Centered around two blessed candles, the Bible, the Rule of Benedict, and the keys of the convent, all placed on the altar, the community members sang the hymn, “Veni Creator Spiritus,” and then “cast their votes in the designated urn. There was no electioneering, no one soliciting votes for the sister of her choice.”\textsuperscript{149} The unanimous election of Meinrada was then announced by the Prior, who called her forward to take the oath of office. Placing her right hand on the Bible, she spoke the following words in a “clear but tremulous” voice:

I, Sister Mary Meinrada Lex, who have been elected Prioress of the Convent of St. Scholastica at Shoal Creek, Arkansas, promise to God and His Saints, here in the presence of my beloved Sisters, that I
myself will hence forward, at all times, faithfully observe the Holy Rule and the Constitutions of our community and will, moreover, require of all the Sisters the faithful and punctual observance of the same Holy Rule and Constitution, as they are kept here in this Convent.¹⁵⁰

The Prior then presented her with a copy of the Rule of Benedict, enjoining her to “accept the Rule of our Holy Father St. Benedict, that by the same you may guide the souls entrusted to you by God, for which may He himself grant you strength.”¹⁵¹ The keys of the convent were next given to her, with the following admonition:

Receive with these keys the maternal care of the flock of the Lord, and while you yourself walk in the path of the Divine Law, lead them to the pasture of the celestial inheritance. So help you our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with the Father and the Holy Ghost, world without end. Amen.¹⁵²

The ceremony ended with the hymn, “Te Deum Laudamus,” and a recessional to the community room. There the sisters offered the newly elected Prioress “their hearty cooperation, and their prayerful congratulations.”¹⁵³

The advent of American-born prioresses during the first thirty years of Benedictine women in America may have only relative significance in the long and gradual process of their Americanization. However, birth data on prioresses of this period indicate that by the year 1881, at least five American-born women had become prioresses in Chicago (1868), St. Marys, PA (1875), St. Cloud (1877), Nauvoo (1879), and Creston/Tulsa (1879).¹⁵⁴ Precisely how these women became agents of Americanization in their role as prioresses is, of course, elusive. They were not theorists about Benedictine life. Rather, they were practitioners of the Gospel and the Rule of Benedict, and in doing what they needed to do, they became the architects of Benedictine life in a new form.¹⁵⁵

Acceptance and Formation of New Members

One of the most fascinating but mysterious discoveries of this study was the rapid, even phenomenal, growth of membership in communities of Benedictine women almost immediately upon their arrival in America. “What was it that drew these young women to a community that, on a natural basis, had nothing to
offer except hunger, hard work and insecurity?”  

Ultimately, any theory in response to this question must bow to the intangible reality of Divine Providence at work within and among these seekers of God. Benedicta Riepp, herself, reflected on this question in her early correspondence, and concluded that their simple way of life attracted members who desired to renounce worldly pleasures in a spirit of sacrifice and self-surrender.

It can be contended that the early nineteenth-century revival of Catholicism in Europe had set the stage not only for the revival of religious orders in those countries where the Roman Catholic Church had once been strong, but also for the missionary influx of religious orders into the New World. Undoubtedly, immigrant families in America nurtured the prospect of offering a son or a daughter in service of the Church, just as their parents and grandparents had done before them.

On a more poignant note, the destitute poverty of so many immigrant families may have urged parents, in some cases, to give over to the charge of the sisters a daughter or two who eventually joined the Order. One such instance was recorded in the Corporation Book of St. Walburg Monastery, Covington, KY, on May 23, 1878.

Calling a meeting of the principal members—votes to be given as to the adoption of Mary Maiers, whose mother is on the point of death. All consent, and Mary, a child of six years, is bound until she attains her eighteenth year.

The entry was signed by Prioress Alexia Lechner and Evangelista Pfrangle, secretary of the community. Thirteen years later, on August 24, 1891, Mary Maiers “received the holy habit,” and her new name, Camilla.

The pressing need for women to be of service in the immigrant Church may have been the most significant factor in the rapid growth of the Benedictine Order in those early years. The centennial historian of St. Scholastica Convent, Fort Smith, AR, suggests that “without seeing the whole picture clearly,” those early women “sensed they were part of the church’s missionary effort at a particularly opportune time in history.” The urgent demand for more and more church-related schools could only be met “if there were people courageous and self-sacrificing enough to devote themselves to this work. The sisters felt needed. The field of action was vast.”
It has been noted previously that the sometimes indiscriminate acceptance of new members was a mixed blessing. Because of the proliferation of members in some of the early communities, survival needs often became a critical problem. The hasty acceptance of members added to their numbers women who were unsuited for the rigors of convent life. Boniface Wimmer’s interference with the process of admitting and training new members in the women’s communities was the issue at the top of her list when Benedicta Riepp went to Rome with her grievances in 1857.162

Benedicta’s indignation appears justified in view of the Konstitutionen of 1846, in which seven out of its thirty-one chapters had been devoted to matters regarding the reception of candidates, the scrutinium for postulants and novices, the reception and instruction of novices, the voting process and the profession of vows. The structure and process of accepting and training new members was the sacred trust of the Chapter in the European tradition, and an important way in which the community exercised its cherished autonomy.

The scrutinium of postulants and novices as prescribed in the Konstitutionen was rigorous and meticulous in detail. The document contained approximately twenty-two carefully formulated questions to be posed to the candidate, covering all areas of the life into which she was seeking entrance. Above all, the candidate was to be asked

... whether she is willing to leave the world to follow the call of Our Lord, to carry his precious cross out of love for him in a Benedictine family; whether, after long and ardent prayer for light, she believes that acceptance by this community and adherence to its rules and its way of living will be the most suitable and fitting way to serve God, to secure her salvation, to work with God’s grace, to devote herself to acquire purity and the perfection of her soul; whether these are her honest intentions, or whether she is motivated by the hope and desire of her parents, relatives or acquaintances, or by the longing to avoid danger, sadness, anxiety or other difficulties in order to lead an easy, carefree and happy life.163

It was the Prioress and the Novice Mistress who were to conduct the scrutinium, and when they had ascertained the candidate’s readiness her application was made known to the community, at which time she was introduced to the sisters, giving them the opportunity to meet her and speak with her. After this introduction, the Prioress then reminded the candidate of her
obligations toward the community and questioned her in the presence of all, with questions provided by the local bishop. If at this point in the process the candidate remained "steadfast in her request," the date was set for the Chapter to vote on her acceptance.

It seems that all members of the community attended the Chapter of Admission, but only the choir sisters were allowed to vote. The community members were urged by the Prioress to prepare themselves for the voting by earnest prayer and reflection. When voting to accept a postulant into the novitiate, they were requested to keep the following five points in mind:

1. That humble, kind, peaceable and docile qualities of character are the most important and necessary.
2. That a candidate who does not possess the qualities prescribed in these statutes does not have a true vocation to the religious life.
3. That it is a burden and obvious danger in a community to have individuals who do not have a good disposition, but who are easily offended, proud, envious, jealous, arrogant and inclined to murmur. Such a person would eventually destroy the peace in the community.
4. That such persons may be able to hide these dangerous passions for some time, but they will eventually surface.
5. That it is always risky to accept such a person and that it is safer to refuse her.

The Chapter voted on a candidate for admittance into four distinct stages: 1) for a candidate's acceptance into the postulancy for a duration of six months, 2) for a novice's entrance into the twelve-month period of novitiate, 3) when a novice was ready to profess vows for three years, and 4) when the period of temporary commitment came to an end with the profession of perpetual vows. The voting event was the same at each stage of formation. On the designated day, after the conventual Mass, the community members gathered at a place specified, and knelt to sing the "Ave Maris Stella," and the "Veni Creator Spiritus," with versicle and oration. This concluded, articles one to seven of the first chapter of the Konstitutionen were read aloud, while each sister prayed silently and decided how to vote. The voting was done with black and white beans. One bean is dropped in a container and the rest of the beans the sister retains in another container. The Prioress and officials count the beans to see whether all have voted. Then the black are separated from the white ones and by order of the Superior, one of the officials announces the outcome. The white
beans are favorable, the black ones unfavorable. In case the vote is 50/50, or more than $\frac{1}{3}$ are negative, the acceptance of the candidate should be refused. If the outcome is positive, the above mentioned prayers are repeated to ask God to bless the decision just made.\textsuperscript{166}

The \textit{Konstitutionen} also prescribed in great detail what the prospective new member needed to learn at each stage of her formation.\textsuperscript{167} The six-month postulancy was the stage during which the candidate and community were to become better acquainted. She was in the charge of the Novice Mistress during this time and followed the schedule of the novices. Her specific task was to "learn about the rules and regulations and to get to know the difficulties of the religious life."\textsuperscript{168} At the end of six months, before her reception into the novitiate, she was required to make a ten day retreat and a general confession.

The twelve-month novitiate, prescribed by the Council of Trent, was the critical phase of the entire formation process. Its purpose was for the community "to get to know the candidate, to make her familiar with the practices of convent life, to test and teach her, and thus to provide her with the opportunity to get to know herself. This probation time is of the greatest importance."\textsuperscript{169} The novitiate was to be situated away from the housing of the professed sisters, who were not allowed to go to the novitiate without the permission of the Prioress. To prevent the novice's "distraction and any possible harmful influence," she was not allowed to speak to anyone outside the novitiate, or to write or receive letters or notes without the explicit permission of the superior. She had only those books in her possession which had been given to her by the Novice Mistress for her devotion and edification. The novices could not leave the building without permission, and were always accompanied by the Novice Mistress at the Divine Office. The Novice Mistress was required to give a report about each novice to the whole community every three months. "In this way the sisters are better informed by the time of the voting for her acceptance or non-acceptance."\textsuperscript{170}

At the end of the novitiate year, "the novice humbly asks the whole community for permission to profess vows, and then the professed sisters prayerfully prepare themselves for the voting."\textsuperscript{171} The voting was to be done one month in advance of profession, so that the Bishop could be informed of the community's vote, and conduct his own interview of the novice, as was required by the Council of Trent. During the last month of
the novitiate, the novice was urged to prepare herself with "all assiduity for the immense grace of professing vows. She should do this by special mortifications, penances, prayers, meditations, more frequent reception of the most holy sacraments, by making a general confession about her time in the novitiate, and an eight day retreat." 172 While the novice was preparing herself in this manner, the Prioress and the community prayed for her publicly during the Divine Office.

During the three-year period of temporary vows, the newly professed sister remained in the charge of the Novice Mistress. Whether a choir or lay sister, she was assigned a specific work by the Prioress. During this stage she had neither an active or passive vote in community matters. 173 There was a provision in the statutes for the renewal of vows at the end of three years, in the event that a candidate would not be ready for a life commitment: "As long as a sister has not made perpetual vows, she should appear every three years ... before the Chapter to be examined. ... The Chapter votes according to the statutes, deciding whether the candidate should be permitted to renew her vows or be dismissed." 174

It is not difficult to predict what happened to this highly structured process in the circumstances of pioneer America. It simply did not work. In this matter, nearly rampant diversity was the norm during the first thirty years of Benedictine women in America. The one-year canonical novitiate, set by the Council of Trent, was the only stable component of the formation process. Regarding the duration of the postulancy and even the period of temporary vows, there appears to have been great flexibility.

From day one, the cramped housing quarters of the fledgling communities threw the candidates into the mainstream of the community, whether they were ready for it or not. There could be no such thing as novitiate housing separate from the professed members. The realities of frontier life and the work they had undertaken forced pioneer Benedictine women to meet their pressing need for new members, and thus to adapt their entrance requirements and process accordingly. The Eichstätt statutes had been firm about accepting only candidates who evidenced good health. However, one recruit at St. Joseph, MN, exhibited other needed qualities. Angela Petit entered there in 1866.

She was twenty-six years of age and of delicate constitution; but on account of being a very pious and exemplary person and having a
fair education in the German and English language, she was admitted.\textsuperscript{175}

A widow entered the Chicago house as early as May 4, 1865. She had some qualities desperately needed by the young community.

Mrs. Monica Suess, a 50 year old widow, instead of being a burden to a small community, was an asset since she was highly respected in Chicago, and knew how to approach the business world in which the majority of the sisters were unschooled. She was genial and happy and had no difficulty in adjusting to her new life.\textsuperscript{176}

Adjustments even had to be made regarding the rules of strict enclosure for novices. In the late 1870’s, Pancratia Boeswald, a novice in the Newark community was assigned to teach in the Polish school in Wilmington, DE. Daily she would “replace her white veil with a black one and, accompanied by a child, walk from Sacred Heart to St. Hedwig’s.”\textsuperscript{177}

There was great variety also in the duration of the various stages of the acceptance and formation process. Frequently, candidates were invested as novices immediately, bypassing the six month stage of postulancy prescribed in the Eichstätt statutes. It was not uncommon either, for three or four novices to be invested together, but then for one or the other to have a novitiate lasting two years or longer.\textsuperscript{178} The reasons for individual decisions were rarely recorded, however extreme youth was often a factor that prevented a candidate from advancing through the stages more quickly.

There were also differences in the practice of professing perpetual vows after a probationary period of three years. In Fort Smith, AR, and Ferdinand, IN, for instance, a two-year novitiate was the norm, followed by the reception of the black veil and the profession of vows for three years. “After the lapse of these three years are renewed for five more years so that after the present practice the religious will have had plenty of time in ten years to decide before making her simple perpetual vows to God.”\textsuperscript{179}

Although the 1846 Konstitutionen urged that in accepting candidates “the Superior should direct her special attention to those candidates who can teach or who can be prepared for it,”\textsuperscript{180} in America the new communities accepted just about anyone. The earliest chronicler of the St. Joseph, MN, community wrote that during the 1860s, candidates were accepted with whatever education they may have had, and little or nothing was done to educate
and train them further for teaching. On the other hand, during the earliest days at St. Mary's, PA, Boniface Wimmer arranged for the instruction of the novices by his monks. Nepomucene Ludwig remembered learning Latin from *Broder's Handbook of the Latin Language*, taught by Benedict Haindl. Leonard Mayer taught chant and music, while Ignatius Trueg tutored some in mathematics, rhetoric and psychology.

Little was recorded about the ceremony and rituals which accompanied a candidate's movement from stage to stage in the formation process. Entrance into the novitiate was commonly called "reception" or "investiture," and there are frequent references to "receiving the holy habit" at this time. The most central act in the ceremony of profession appears to have been the reading of the vow document, which each candidate had written and signed in her own hand. The Constitution of 1880 prescribed that those "who have made perpetual vows shall wear a little gold ring with I.H.S. engraved on it, according to the custom of the Order." One source recorded some of the solemn prayers used in an 1887 profession ceremony. A lengthy preface sung over the newly professed begged God to "take, we beseech thee, the vows and creeds of these your servants who have come to you for refuge from the vanity, dangers and storms of this world." A new habit was then given to the newly professed by the presiding bishop, as he prayed: "Receive this garment of salvation that our Holy Father Benedict preserves intact, in order that when you, in following him, join his army, you may enjoy happiness before the judgment seat of Christ." When bestowing the ring, the bishop prayed: "Receive this ring of faith, the symbol of the Holy Spirit that shows you as a follower of Christ, and you will be crowned in eternity." The 1880 Constitution, drafted to reckon with the circumstances of Benedictine women in America, dealt with the diversity surrounding the acceptance and formation of new members in three carefully detailed and concise chapters: "On the Novitiate," "On the Vows," and "On the Scholasticate." For "young women" desiring to be admitted to the first stage, the postulancy, the requirements were fivefold: 1) irreproachable character, 2) of respectable parents, 3) free of obligations toward anyone "in the world," 4) sound of mind and body, and 5) not less than fifteen, nor more than 25 years in age. The candidate was further advised to pay, if possible, one hundred dollars to cover the expenses of
her postulancy and novitiate, including the cost of the religious habit she would receive at the beginning of the novitiate. The duration of the postulancy was to be “about five months,” at the end of which she would receive the habit and become a novice “by the consent of the Bishop and a majority of votes of the chapter.”

The novitiate was to last “one full year.” The novices, as well as the postulants and candidates, were to be segregated from the rest of the community under the care of the Novice Mistress. At least one half hour a day was to be devoted to instruction “in the Holy Rule, this constitution and the manual for novices.” In addition, they were to receive instructions “in the manner of meditating, of making their particular and general examination of conscience, of saying the office and of making their culpa.” They were also required to study catechism and Bible history at least twice a week. Curiously, the study of music was “forbidden,” except singing for church or choir practice. “Those novices, however, who already have acquired a knowledge of music may be allowed practicing it privately for themselves once or twice a week, about half an hour each time.”

As was prescribed earlier in the Eichstätt statutes, the novice was required to appear before the Chapter every three months in order to be examined in regard to her spiritual progress and suitability for religious life. The Novice Mistress was responsible for this “tri-monthly scrutinium,” for her duty was not only to instruct them in the religious life, “but [also to] inure them to its hardships. She has to watch carefully if they really seek God by obedience, humility, silence and love of prayer.”

Novices and postulants were not allowed to visit sick relatives or parents, or to attend funerals or burials, unless sanctioned by the bishop if their presence was “necessary to settle family affairs, to prevent a great loss to the community, law suits or such like scandal.” Ordinarily, upon hearing of sickness or death in their families, they were admonished to “recommend them to the mercy of God by fervent prayers and strict religious life.”

In individual cases and for good reasons, the novitiate could be extended but not beyond six months. The period of first vows was to be three years, after which the new members were to be admitted to simple perpetual vows. There was no provision in the 1880 Constitution for the renewal of vows after the triennial period. The rather surprising mobility of sisters from community to
community during the pioneer period must have occasioned the inclusion of article seven in the chapter on the vows. Sisters under first vows could not attach themselves to another community without the consent of the bishop and prioress. If anyone did so, she was to be expelled from the community with automatic cancellation of her vows. For a member under perpetual vows who did the same, a dispensation of vows from the bishop was necessary. If she failed to receive a dispensation, she was to be considered “an apostate and unfit to receive the sacraments, except when in danger of death she be truly repentant and willing to repair the scandal.”

The most unusual innovation of the 1880 Constitution in the chapters on initial formation was the plan to establish a general novitiate for the Order in America. It was not a completely new idea since Boniface Wimmer and Benedicta Riepp had been in dialogue about the same prospect some twenty-five years earlier. However, the Constitution spoke of a general novitiate as if it were already in the making. “As soon as a general novitiate shall have been established the novices shall be sent there and no novice can be admitted to the vows unless she shall have passed satisfactorily at least one full year in said general novitiate.” The general novitiate never materialized, and proved to be one of the most controversial elements of the 1880 Constitution when it was reviewed and discussed at the Chicago General Chapter in 1881.

Some intentional moves toward Americanization occurred in chapters nine and ten of the Constitution. The first one noted earlier, was a simple statement prescribing that “the sisters shall ordinarily make their vows in English.” Secondly, the inauguration of the “scholasticate” was necessitated by the sisters’ increasing involvement in the American Church’s educational enterprise. The scholasticate was to be a community sponsored “school” located at the motherhouse, in which sister-teachers were to be taught those branches of studies which were part of the curriculum in Catholic schools and academies: religion, catechism, Bible history, church and “profane” history, English literature, German and other languages deemed necessary, arithmetic and mathematics, bookkeeping, vocal music, piano and other instruments being taught in the schools. The sisters were encouraged to be so well schooled in these subjects “as to be able to teach to the glory and honor of the holy church.” The plan of studies required the approval of the bishop in whose diocese the
scholasticate was located. Besides instruction in the above-listed courses, members of the scholasticate were to be taught “the manner of teaching either by being placed in schools with experienced teachers, or by being entrusted with teaching a few hours every day while making their scholastic course, so far as it may be done conveniently.” How widespread the implementation of the scholasticate was in the 1880's is not readily discernible. But what is eminently clear from nearly all the sources of this early period is that the work of teaching and preparing to teach was always secondary to the common observances of Benedictine cenobitic life.

The Common Life and Observances

Neither the Eichstätt Konstitutionen of 1846 nor the 1880 American Constitution included a chapter on the nature of community life. Community was a given, as ancient as the Rule of Benedict itself, and so pervasive and encompassing that one could view all of the chapters in each document as ordered to the single and ultimate end of “forming a religious community and leading a community life.” In fact, that is precisely how “enclosure” came to be defined in the American document. Thirty years of experience had adequately shown that observance of the enclosure in the strict sense of the Church had never been possible in America.

As was true of so many other aspects of their lives, Benedictine women in America tried heroically and often foolishly to observe the rule of enclosure as it had been prescribed in chapter twelve of the Eichstätt statutes—total separation from the world and its “temptations, dangers and distractions,” in order to lead a “hidden life with Christ.” In the early days of convent life in St. Cloud, MN, certain parts of the house declared to be within the enclosure and a grille across the door of the room facing the street, constituted the enclosure. However, the community soon experienced that the rule of strict enclosure brought with them from Bavaria was hardly compatible with teaching in a frontier parochial school. Playground supervision from a window or doorway was ineffective, and the nuns’ apparent aloofness from the people of the settlement was a serious cause of misunderstanding and alienation. The absurdity of their efforts is dramatized in a
story recorded in the memoirs of Elizabeth Tenvoorde, an eye­
witness of the early St. Cloud situation. Since there was no fence
surrounding the house and property of the sisters, the enclosure
ended at the door sill. The neighboring monks, who provided
wood for the convent, piled it outside the door and window. As
the wood pile receded, it was beyond the reach of the person with
the longest arms. Rather than leave the enclosure, the sisters
opted to do without heat for a day and a night.201

Nearly every community founded during this era wrestled
with the problem of enclosure. The annals of St. Walburg Monas­
tery in Covington, KY, recorded the consternation of the commu­
nity when the trustees of St. Joseph Church removed the partition
between the organ loft of the church and the convent, "thereby
making it impossible for the sisters to attend services in the
church."202 The Prioress called a meeting to discuss the act of the
trustees which had "left the sisters among the laity." A compro­
mise was the result. The "partition is to be partially rebuilt—and
an ornamental curtain added to take the place of the remaining
open space."203 The sisters in Richmond, VA, adapted the rule of
enclosure by wearing heavy veils while going to and from church
and school.204 And as noted earlier, the prioress of the community
in Erie held out against the bishop a long time for the sake of ob­
serving the rule of enclosure. On several occasions Scholastica
Burkhard refused the invitation of Bishop Mullen to send her sis­
ters to teach in the parish schools of Erie, since that would involve
their residence outside the motherhouse.205

Although the 1880 Constitution acknowledged that there was
"no enclosure in the strict sense of the Church for the sisters of St.
Benedict in this country," the document enumerated fourteen
items that severely restricted their mobility and communication
with the people among whom they worked.206 This was only the
beginning of a long history of cloistral ambiguity which American
Benedictine women would share with all the sisterhoods in
America for many decades to come. On the one hand, the ideal of
religious life held up to them by the Church was "that of an aris­
tocratic, cloistered, contemplative European nun, while in reality
she was a sister who had to support herself and perform the
works of mercy that were desperately needed by the immigrant
Church struggling to survive in a predominantly Protestant,
egalitarian culture."207
For pioneer Benedictine women in America, the supreme value of living a community life was not tarnished by their inability to live the rule of enclosure as they had experienced it in Bavaria. It is beyond comprehension to imagine what it was like for Benedicta Riepp and her companions to move an ancient and tried mode of life from the historic, ornate environs of St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt, to a little shack in the wilderness clearing of St. Marys, PA. Nepomucene Ludwig, who had actually lived in that shack in the early days, remembered how their three rooms and the attic were arranged into a space that reflected their communal values—prayer, work, hospitality, the common table, and study.

First attention was directed to the accommodations for a chapel. A large room was set aside for this purpose where Divine Services could be held, and the Blessed Sacrament reserved. To the south of this room, there was a larger room that served the purpose of school. And to the east of these rooms, space was reserved for reception [of guests] and refectory purposes. The quarters were small, and yet, a small corner back of the refectory had to serve as a kitchen... the refectory also served the purposes of a study hall.

In the early decades of Benedictine women in America, the same task of physically arranging their poverty-stricken places to facilitate the values of their communal life was repeated over and over again, whether a small group settled into an independent daughter-house in Erie, PA, or a little “branch house” in Seneca, KS.

The ordering of time as well as space to incarnate the values of community life was as old as the Rule of Benedict itself. The horarium in the early days at St. Mary’s, PA, was rigorous and demanded heroic patience and courage, especially from the younger members, many of whom were still mere children. Rising time was 3:30 a.m., followed by a short period of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in chapel from 3:45–4:00. Between 4:00 and 5:00 a.m., Matins and Lauds were prayed by the professed choir sisters in the chapel, while the lay sisters prayed fifteen decades of the rosary in the adjacent room. Meditation, Prime, and Mass preceded 7:00 breakfast, which was followed by Terce, Sext and None. The period from 8:00 to 10:45 was devoted to work, study, and teaching. After the particular examen at 10:45, the community gathered for the midday meal followed by a visit to the Blessed Sacrament and recreation. From 12:45 to 1:00, each sister engaged in private spiritual reading (lectio divina). The half hour after
reading was reserved for praying the psalms in honor of Mary, one psalm in honor of the Sacred Heart, and the rosary. Another block of time, from 1:30 to 4:00 was set aside for work, study and teaching. At 4:00 “a small afternoon lunch consisting of a piece of bread and a drink of water” was available as sustenance until the dinner hour at 6:00. Immediately before dinner, at 5:30, the community gathered for common spiritual reading. The evening meal was followed by a visit to the Blessed Sacrament and recreation. At 7:30 p.m. the community prayed Vespers and Compline and retired for the night at 8:30.209

Changes in the horarium transplanted from the Eichstatt motherhouse became necessary as early as 1854. The rising time was changed to 4:30 a.m., and a 7:30 Mass was provided for “the teachers and all such as, owing to their obedience, are prevented from attending the Conventual Mass.”210 All hours of the Divine Office were still being prayed, although at different times during the day—7:15 a.m. Prime, 9:00 Conventual Mass, Tierce, Sext, None, 3:00 p.m. Vespers and Compline, and 5:00 p.m. Matins and Lauds. The rosary was still to be said, “but privately at a time chosen by each according to her leisure.” The day closed at 8:00 p.m. with “night prayers and reading of the points for the following day’s meditation in private.”211

For a decade or more after its founding, the St. Cloud/St. Joseph, MN, community arose at midnight to pray Matins and Lauds. They retired again about 1:45 a.m., until 6:00 a.m. Prime. It was their practice not to eat breakfast, “not even [to] drink water,” until the noon meal at 11:30 a.m. Shortly before she was deposed by Abbot Rupert Seidenbusch in 1868, Prioress Willibalda Scherbauer recognized that the spiritual and physical welfare of her sisters demanded that breakfast be allowed—a cup of coffee made from roasted wheat or barley, and a small piece of bread.212 Her successor, Antonia Hermann, continued the custom of taking breakfast, and changed the midnight recitation of Matins and Lauds to 4:00 in the morning.213 By the late 1860’s and into the 1870’s, further changes in the daily horarium were being made by most communities, since the recitation of the full Divine Office was being supplanted by the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Undoubtedly, by 1880 the diversity of horariums from house to house was so great that the Constitution made no attempt to prescribe the order of the day, as had been the custom in the Eichstätt statutes.
Life on the frontier demanded adaptation and diversity in many areas of the common life where uniformity had been prized in the Bavarian tradition. However, there was one aspect of their early American way of life in which all Benedictine women participated—the experience of poverty and privation. Inadequate living conditions and improper diet plagued the women of these early decades. The common table for the women at St. Marys, PA, in the 1850’s consisted of potatoes, the only thing the Pennsylvania soil would grow. Occasionally they feasted on rye bread, buckwheat cakes and thin soup. By night, with only thin coverlets of cloth and no shawls and gloves, they endured the cold and snow which often made its way through the openings in the roof on to their beds.214 In Erie, PA, the principal meal three days a week included dry bread and a single vegetable. On feast days, however, the ordinary bread dough was baked into “extra-thick” crusts, to make a kind of pie with a filling of “extra-thin” sweetmeats.215 The community in St. Joseph, MN, rarely ate meat. The noon meal consisted of a bowl of soup, potatoes, pancakes or something similar, like noodles—sometimes only thick milk and a bowl of wild spinach. Almost daily, the evening meal was a fare of potatoes in the jacket and a small piece of bread.216 The sisters at Shoal Creek, AR, in the late 1870’s existed on an unvaried diet of cornbread, beans and molasses.217 The drinking water available to the community in Richmond, VA, was contaminated and the only “method of filtration for drinking water was to have it run over large stones into a crock, the stones requiring careful washing day by day.”218 As far south as New Orleans, hardship prevailed into the 1880’s. “Bedsteads were about the only furnishings. Empty flour barrels were used for washstands, boxes for chairs, tin cans for cups and glasses.”219

Concerning these realities nothing was normative material for the Constitution of 1880. Poverty and privation would have been asceticism enough in American circumstances. However, a long tradition of ascetical observances written into their rule of life predated these involuntary experiences of destitution and deprivation. Chief among these observances were fasting, chapter of faults, and silence.

Mindful of the two chapters on “The Proper Amount of Food” and “The Proper Amount of Drink” in the Rule of Benedict, the Konstitutionen of 1846 carefully spelled out the observances regarding food and drink in a chapter entitled, “About the
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Refectory." Already there is a hint of adaptation in these matters, since the community in Eichstatt had recently taken on the work of teaching. The chapter opens with a reminder that "since the choir sisters as well as the lay sisters are in the school or working at any other place all day, care should be taken to preserve their health by providing enough wholesome food without violating religious poverty or any other demands of their holy profession."220 The food prescribed for the noon meal on ferial days included "soup with beef and vegetables, and a plate with cold vegetables." On Sundays and feastdays it was left to the discretion of the superior to allow an entree and a dessert. The evening meal consisted of soup and tea, with the addition of some kind of meat on Tuesdays. On Sundays and feastdays, roast beef and salad could be added.221 The community observed the Church's regular days of fast and abstinence, as well as abstinence on all Wednesdays and Saturdays throughout the year.

Although the chapter is lengthy and minute in its detail about the required conduct at meals, it is striking in its exhortations that moderation be preserved. Interspersed throughout the chapter, the superior is reminded that "there should always be sufficient bread for the sisters at noon as well as in the evening," and always "to take care that neither the healthy nor the sick suffer privation regarding food." While it is her charge to see that "the religious discipline concerning food and drink is carefully observed, nevertheless she should show tender and kind-hearted consideration towards the sick and also especially towards those who perform heavy work and those who have a reasonable need for comfort."222

The prescriptions concerning fast and abstinence remained nearly the same in the 1880 Constitution. Wednesdays and Saturdays throughout the year remained days of abstinence with a few exceptions—the ten days before Ash Wednesday, the days of the octave from Christmas to Epiphany, and the whole of the Paschal season.223 The Eichstatt spirit of moderation also prevailed in the American constitution's chapter "On Meat and Drink." "Owing to the circumstances of this country the sisters are allowed three full meals a day, except on days of fasting." More specifically, on occasions of "laborious work," the Prioress could "add meat to their ordinary breakfast of coffee and bread, and on days on which meat is not served she may add butter." While the 1846 statutes had been silent on Benedict's allowance of a hemina of wine per day (RB 40:3), the Prioress in America was encouraged
to give the sisters "a little beer or wine at times," if she deemed it "conducive to discipline or to the health of the sisters." 224

Provision for the repression and reparation of faults in the Rule of Benedict (23–30 and 43–46) had evolved over the centuries into an observance called the "Chapter of Faults." The Rule exhorted that anyone who "commits a fault . . . must at once come before the abbot and community and of his own accord admit his fault and make satisfaction (46:3)." Taking its cue from this verse, the Konstitutionen of 1846 prescribed that the "Chapter of Faults once practiced, then fallen into disuse, should be restored." 225

For the nuns at St. Walburg's in Eichstätt, the Chapter of Faults was to be held every week in the Chapter room, preferably on Saturdays. The community members were to kneel before the Prioress, and "with folded hands should humbly and honestly confess their exterior faults without making excuses or being evasive." 226 All were to remain silent during the Chapter, unless questioned by the superior. Following the confession of faults, they were to "listen attentively to the admonition of the superior and accept the penance given humbly and patiently." Without complaint or murmur, they were admonished to consider all this "a means to achieve salvation." 227

The centrality and gravity of the Chapter of Faults in cenobitic observance was beyond question in the Eichstätt constitution. Following the first chapter (20) on the topic, were seven additional chapters, 228 three of which were literal compendiums of the kinds of faults to be confessed. Three more chapters listed the types of penances to be assigned to "lighter faults," "more weighty faults," and "greater faults." The kinds of faults to be confessed numbered fifty-one, and included infractions as minor as walking too fast through the hallways, and as serious as ruining the reputation of another community member through intentional lying. 229 Among the twenty-eight penances listed were such things as exclusion from the common recreation, prostrating before the sisters when leaving the chapel or refectory, cell confinement, or even being deprived of Holy Communion on a Sunday or feastday. 230 Chapter twenty-seven of the Konstitutionen closed the section on the Chapter of Faults with an extended and detailed description of the ritual procedures to be carried out during the Chapter, and of the manner in which the varied penances were to be performed. 231

It is rare to find in the chronicles or local histories of the communities under study here, any allusions to the cenobitic practice
of confessing faults publicly. Undoubtedly, the Chapter of Faults was viewed as a sacred event, a confidential community matter, not to be spoken of within or without the community or to be trivialized in any way. One early chronicler, discussing the “mortifications and penances” practiced during the 1860’s and 1870’s in America, described penances closely patterned after the Eichstätt statutes. There is no reason to believe that the sisters in America discontinued the Chapter of Faults. The American Constitution of 1880 prescribed it in a single chapter devoted to the observance of “culpa chapter.” There was no evidence of significant change in the observance due to American circumstances, however the lists of faults and penances were absent. Novices and sisters were simply required to “accuse themselves of their shortcomings in regard to the outward observance of the Holy Rule and the order of the day.”

The new work of teaching assumed by St. Walburg’s Convent in Eichstätt after the period of secularization, necessitated changes in the traditional observance of silence, just as it had demanded adaptation of the rule of enclosure. Moreover, American circumstances generated more than a little ambiguity about the very role of silence in a way of life now confronted with the reality of daily interaction with the immigrant children and families the sisters had come to serve.

Following the lead of the Rule of Benedict with a specific chapter devoted to silence (6), the Eichstätt statutes of 1846 had also detailed its prescriptions in a chapter on both the matter of silence and of speaking. Surprisingly, the 1880 Constitution omitted a specific chapter on silence, and spoke of it only in relationship to the annual retreat, the monthly day of recollection, the Lenten observance and table reading. In both documents, “recreation” was understood as the appropriate time for conversation and was always a communal event. The topic of recreation had its own chapter in the American constitution.

The Konstitutionen specified that the motivation behind “conventual silence as one of the most important precepts,” was the goal of prayer, recollection, and the promotion of monastic order. Strict silence was to be observed in the whole house after the recreation period following the evening meal, until the next morning after Mass. At all other times, excluding the evening recreation, only necessary speech was to be allowed and that always in “a low voice.” Meals were taken in silence, accompanied by
table reading. Infractions against the rule of silence were to be publicly confessed at the Chapter of Faults, and the offender “penalized accordingly.”

The 1880 Constitution made no general statement about a rule of silence or its purpose in the Benedictine way of life. However, from an item in chapter sixteen on the “Lenten Observance,” it can be inferred that a strict rule of evening and night silence existed just as it had in Eichstätt. This item was the most direct comment on silence in the entire document:

During Lent all the Fridays shall be passed in silence as far as circumstances may allow. On the other days silence should begin in the evening one quarter or one half hour sooner than usual as far as it may be done according to circumstances.

Other references to the practice of silence occur in the chapter on “Retreat.” In addition to a “general annual retreat at the motherhouse,” during which community members were to devote themselves to “meditation, recollection and prayer,” they were to observe the first Sunday of every month as a “day of recollection by silence.” In chapter seventeen on “Meditation and Spiritual Reading,” it was noted that silence and table reading could be dispensed with “on great feasts of the Church or Order,” at the discretion of the Prioress. It appears that the rule of table silence was more relaxed in the branch houses where there were only five or six sisters. It was suggested that there, “the table reading shall consist at least in the reading of about a dozen verses of the New Testament and the Martyrology at dinner, and Lives of the Saints at supper—as best it may be done.”

Recreation was a communal observance both in the European and early American experience of Benedictine life. In Eichstätt attendance at the noon and evening period of recreation was compulsory. Each community member was exhorted to “make the common recreation a joyful event.” “Amusing and cheerful and less serious things” could be spoken about, but in general they were encouraged to “converse about edifying matters.” Topics to be avoided were the “talk of the town,” “worldly affairs,” “the faults of others or what is happening in the neighboring convents, or what was heard in the parlor or along the grapevine. Neither should there be heard any impolite, prying or improper words, nor burlesque or futile talk. . . . The sisters’ speaking must always be distinguished by gentleness, patience, love, prudence, discretion, simplicity and humility.” In addition to conversation, the
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Chapter twenty-two of the 1880 Constitution viewed the compulsory common recreation periods as time set apart "to foster mutual affection and charity." Especially not to be tolerated was any "particular friendship between two sisters...as it is a pest in a religious community." Light work, such as knitting, was permitted, and just as the Eichstätt statutes had exhorted, "conversation should be carried on in an edifying manner." Certainly unique to the American scene was the norm that prescribed that "the language of the community shall ordinarily be the same as that of the country in which they live, or of the people among whom they are employed." It can be assumed, although stated very diplomatically, that after three decades of living and working in America the sisters were expected to be speaking English.

Any treatment of Benedictine cenobitic life would be incomplete without a discussion of the value of hospitality, as longstanding in the tradition as the chapters of the Rule of Benedict on "The Reception of Guests" and "The Porter of the Monastery" (53 and 66). The Konstitutionen of 1846, like the Rule, provided for the reception of guests through a designated Portress. Because of the strict rule of enclosure, she was to meet the community's guests through the grille, listening "attentively and politely without interrupting the speaker." After consultation with the superior guests were received in a special place set apart, the parlor. Although the sisters were received, with the permission of the Prioress, to visit with guests—family members, relatives, parents of students—the tone with which this topic was discussed in the Eichstätt statutes was consistently cautious and reserved. The Portress especially, and the community members at large, were admonished to be "polite, cautious, and prudent" in their interaction with "outsiders," and were never to "inquire about current events outside the convent or gossip about anything or anyone in the community." It seems that the lavishness with which Benedict had encouraged his monks to receive guests in the sixth century (RB 53), had been severely tempered among Benedictine women throughout the centuries. The medieval Church law of enclosure had placed a grille between Benedictine women and their guests.

The circumstances in which Benedictine women found themselves in America between 1852 and 1881 rendered the enclosure,
the grille, and cautious reception of guests anachronistic. The women of this period unstintingly sacrificed many of the sacred structures of their lives in order to make space for all of God’s people, even to take up their own spaces. New members invaded their already crowded spaces and school children squirmed in whatever parts of their convent dwellings could double for classroom space. Orphans were taken in and cared for indiscriminately, in spite of the fact that there was barely enough food to go around.

The chronicles and local histories of the communities under study here bear adequate testimony to a radically different expression of the Benedictine value of hospitality in the American context. In addition to the general ways in which the pioneer nuns’ lives intersected daily with “outsiders,” chronicles and annals recorded some rather unique ways in which hospitality or even sanctuary was offered to people in need. One such entry appears in the story of the Chicago community. Some time during the decade between 1877 and 1888 “a cottage was erected on the premises for the use of Paul Birchmeier, father of Sister Josephine, so he could live out his days in peace.”

There is evidence that the custom of appointing a Portress continued in the houses founded during the expansion period of Benedictine women in America. However, the Constitution of 1880 neither prescribed it, nor commented specifically on the topic of the reception of guests. References to visiting in the parlor and offering hospitality to guests occurred in the chapter, “On the Enclosure.” The chapel, parlor, classrooms and music rooms were not included in the enclosure they attempted to identify. Permission of the superior was necessary for visiting in the parlor, in the branch houses as well as the motherhouse. No male guests were allowed to stay overnight in the convent, but “for good reasons respectable women who are near relatives of any of the sisters or pupils at the academy” could be lodged overnight, “though not within the premises exclusively occupied by the sisters.” The Constitution further stipulated that “as soon as circumstances permit a separate house should be built a little distance from the premises exclusively occupied by the community in which female guests could stop overnight.”

Clearly, the tradition of enclosure had for centuries interfered with the ideal mode of receiving guests outlined in the Rule of Benedict. Theoretically, the enclosure continued to limit Benedictine women in their reception of guests during the early decades
of their American experience. Practically, however, quite a different brand of hospitality was being realized. In fact, it may be suggested that the American experience served to dismantle a long standing European custom which surely must have thwarted a full sense of mutual hospitality among community members themselves—the custom of identifying the rank of choir sister as distinct from the lay sister. The Konstitutionen of 1846 preserved the custom, stemming not from the Rule of Benedict but from medieval cultural practice. In Eichstätt a lay sister was distinguished from a choir sister in that she usually had little formal education, professed simple rather than solemn vows, was denied the right to vote in Chapter, engaged in manual labor, and recited the rosary rather than the Divine Office in Latin. 249

During the foundation and expansion periods of Benedictine women in America, all community members were technically given equal status when the privilege of professing solemn vows was abolished. The designation of choir and lay sisters persisted in some houses until the turn of the century, but appears to have been functional only with regard to the recitation of the Divine Office. The Catalogue of 1879 listed the members of the fifteen independent foundations under the headings of “choir sisters” and “lay sisters,” but the introductory descriptions of at least two houses noted that “the community divides into Choir- and Lay-Sisters, though practically, there is little discrimination made,” 250 and “no one is received as Lay-Sister, but all as Choir Sisters.” 251

The earliest chronicler of the St. Cloud/St. Joseph, MN, house noted that for nearly two and half decades after its founding, the community followed the old tradition of dividing the sisters into two “classes.” The choir sisters “recited the Divine Office, taught school, formed the Chapter, and preceded in rank.” The lay sisters “said the rosary, performed the housework, wore the white veil, had no ring and followed the choir sisters in rank.” 252 From the beginning of the Shoal Creek/Fort Smith, AR, community in 1879, no distinction was ever made between choir and lay sisters. All members held the same “rights, privileges, and duties as also the same kind of clothes, even though they gave themselves to different kinds of work.” 253 In the Newark, NJ, house a different form of distinction evolved and lasted well into the twentieth century. The “school sisters” and “domestic sisters” had separate community rooms in the new 1870 convent on Shipman Street. 254 Although attitudinal distinctions died harder, the formal practice of
separating Benedictine women into choir and lay was definitely on its way out by the time an American constitution was drafted.

The Constitution of 1880 neither declared the system of lay sisterhood abolished, nor did it refer to the distinction in any way. However, there was implicit rejection of the idea in statements such as, “to the chapter belong all the sisters who have made perpetual vows.” The issue of choir recitation was more complex, but was handled delicately in the document. It was assumed that the sisters engaged in teaching possessed the necessary educational background for the recitation of the Divine Office in Latin. Consequently, after consultation with the other officials of the community and with the consent of the Bishop, the Prioress retained the right to “designate among the sisters and novices . . . those who are to recite the choir office. She shall select those in particular who have the necessary qualifications for teaching.” A further note indicated that it was also within her discretion to “promote to the choir office” other sisters who became qualified from among those who had been commissioned to pray fifteen decades of the rosary instead.

The lived experience of Benedictine women in America in the last half of the nineteenth century diminished the concern for clearly defined social rank which had been so much a part of their European foremothers’ story. The democratic ideal upon which American life was built did not tolerate such class distinctions, and the nature of Benedictine cenobitic life on the frontier rendered the idea incongruous.

Work

The last two sections of this chapter focus on the elements that form the motto which has characterized the life of Benedictine women and men for centuries—ora et labora, prayer and work. These essential and ideally balanced elements of Benedictine life constitute the framework within which all of the other values discussed in this chapter find their meaning and purpose. While the fifteen centuries of Benedictine history are replete with evidence of the abiding tension between contemplation and action, both in the lives of individual Benedictine women and men and in the
collective life of their institutions, the nineteenth-century experience of Benedictine women in Bavaria and America is a unique chapter in the story of *ora et labora*.

It is true that Benedictine women throughout the centuries had always been, in some form or other, "in the mainstream, fulfilling the mission of Christianity—to serve, to minister to others in love." The modes of ministry had been diverse. Benedictine women had worked within the monastery walls as mystics, writers, copyists, miniaturists and calligraphers, at the same time that others ministered and interacted in the world, exercising quasi-episcopal powers, functioning as ordained deaconesses, and appearing at the legislative councils of monarchs to advise and give counsel. "They taught, they nursed the sick, they practiced all the corporal and spiritual works of mercy—feeding the hungry, counselling the needy, housing orphans—enacting the social gospel of Matthew 25:31. And there were also missionaries."258

However, from the time of Boniface VIII's decree in 1298 (*Periculoso*), Benedictine women and all other European women religious had been subject to strict enclosure. That had been the tradition of all but approximately two hundred years of the history of St. Walburg Convent in Eichstatt, Bavaria. Consequently, when the Benedictine community at Eichstatt agreed to take on the external work of teaching in 1835, in order to reopen their previously secularized convent, they inadvertently gave birth to a new way of being in the balance between work and prayer in Benedictine life. Their way of blending the external work of teaching with the more internal priorities of prayer and community life would become their legacy to Benedictine women in America. As a result, "the constant tension stemming from the persistent search for a balance between the ministries of contemplation and that of the active apostolate," became both the central task and the hallmark of Benedictine women in America for 140 years.

The work of teaching in the restored convent at Eichstatt after 1835 did not abolish the rule of enclosure but necessitated some concessions. Although the school took the nuns outside the enclosure for certain periods during the day, the work of teaching received adequate validation in the *Konstitutionen* of 1846. In an earlier section of this study it was noted that Bishop Karl August von Reisach, in his introductory letter to the document, referred to the "present call of the community as a teaching institute," and aimed to adapt the *Rule of Benedict* to the "present circumstances."
Nowhere is the new endeavor of teaching taken into more account than in the chapters dealing with the reception and instruction of new candidates. In the chapter, “On the Reception of Candidates,” the superior is exhorted to “direct her special attention to those candidates who are able to teach or who can be prepared for teaching.” Similarly, in the chapter “On the Reception and Instruction of Novices,” the document declares:

Returning to the fact that we are called to staff the girls' schools in America, it is important to accept those [candidates] who can become future teachers (although others should not be refused), because there should always be quite a number available. Because of this new endeavor which furthers the good of the community and influences its direction and spirit, I [Bishop Karl August von Reisach] feel bound to decree that the Superior and the community give preference to those candidates who are already capable of teaching or those who have the qualities of mind and body to be trained.

In both of these chapters, there is reference to the meaning and motivation behind the work of teaching. In addition to the practical purpose behind the work—that of financial self-support—it was hoped that the work of teaching would enable the community members to “be strengthened in sisterly love and the faithful observance of the vows... Working together in the same field can only promote and enliven the practice of sisterly love and all religious virtues.”

The need for adaptation and concessions in order to accommodate the external apostolate of teaching shows up in several other chapters of the Konstitutionen. In view of the somewhat “sacred” sense in which the canonical novitiate was understood after the Council of Trent, it is rather surprising to find the following prescription in the chapter “On the Novitiate”:

Those novices who have been selected to be future teachers may, after the first three months in the novitiate, be sent from time to time to the school for practice teaching, if possible, in all of the grades. However, they should always be supervised and treated as novices.

And in the chapter, “On Professing Vows,” it was prescribed that “before finishing the novitiate year the required examination to certify for teaching or any other branch of study should be taken unless the novice has taken it before investiture, which would be more desirable.”
Concern for the effect of teaching on the spiritual welfare of the community was registered in the chapter, "On the Divine Service and Spiritual Exercises."

The teachers especially should devote themselves to meditation with all earnestness and diligence. Because of their work they are exposed to many distractions and occasions for committing faults. By means of their spiritual exercises they can obtain that inner collectedness, understanding, wisdom and will power so necessary for fulfilling the demands of their profession. Through meditation the sisters will not only secure the salvation of the children entrusted to their care by teaching and educating them, but they can achieve even more by their own prayerful and God-pleasing life.266

The Eichstädt community's new work of teaching was not addressed in a specific chapter. Rather, the prescriptions regarding it ran like a thread throughout the entire text of the Konstitutionen and bore witness to the centrality of teaching in the restored convent of St. Walburg's. However, teaching was not the only valued work of the community. In a substantial chapter entitled, "About the Workroom," the basic value of work was asserted and other kinds of work were described.

Benedict, in his sixth-century Rule, had warned against idleness in the monastery (48). The Konstitutionen not only alluded to this exhortation of Benedict, but expounded on it in an almost disproportionate manner.

Each daughter of St. Benedict should especially be on her guard against idleness and all laziness. She should abhor these as a poisoned root which germinates many poisonous fruits. Once giving way to the poison of tepidity and sloth, it will take root in the hearts of even the more perfect sisters and slowly weaken the zeal and devotion which will then disappear entirely. Mind and soul become occupied with idle wishes and frivolous thoughts. ... They become more and more restless, and find it difficult to remain quiet for any length of time in their rooms, at their workplaces or in the choir.267

This discourse against idleness continues for at least another page, urging the community "to wage an everlasting war against all idleness, to bar it from entering and shut the door to this enemy of the monasteries, which are considered holy places." The weapon against this enemy of the community was to be work, "from the early morning until they retire." Therefore, in the time remaining after the hours of prayer, meditation, teaching, or any other assigned work, the community members were to be occupied "by a handicraft so that no way will be given to sloth and
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idleness.” A special room was to be set aside for the work of handicrafts, and it was the superior’s duty to assign the work hours to be spent there. The handicrafts were to be made for the use of the church or to serve the needs of the convent itself. Other work roles specified in the Eichstätt statutes were those of portress, cook, seamstress, and sister in charge of the wardrobe. These services within the community were to be carried out always with “diligence, love, humility and zeal.”

By the time St. Walburg Convent sent three of their members on the mission to America in 1852, teaching had been their primary work for sixteen years. Furthermore, the membership of the post-secularization community had been carefully selected and groomed for the purpose of teaching in the girls’ school of Eichstätt. The convent no longer received a pension from the state, and teaching had become the community’s main avenue of financial self-support. However, the mission to America signalled a new development. Sending sisters to America to minister to the needs of German immigrant children constituted a motivation behind the work of teaching that went far beyond the need for financial self-support. St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt, a Benedictine monastic community without a long-standing tradition of external works, had been circumstantially swept up into the great missionary movement of European Catholicism. Bavarian Benedictine women in America would take up the missionary task alongside their sisters of apostolic congregations, and as a result would be significantly reshaped in their way of life.

Benedicta Riepp and her companions understood clearly why they had come to America, and knew immediately that they would not be sending money “back home” for the support of their sisters in Bavaria. They had come to America “to perform a two-fold mission, namely to instruct young girls, and to spread the Benedictine Order in this part of the world.” Only two short months after their late July arrival in the wilderness clearing of St. Marys, PA, Benedicta Riepp, Walburga Dietrich, and Maura Flieger opened a school for girls. This pattern of nearly simultaneous arrival in a place followed by school-opening, was to become commonplace during the first thirty years of Benedictine women in America.

Between the years 1852 and 1881, work for Benedictine women in America was almost exclusively teaching and “domestic duties.” The work of teaching was barely self-sustaining. One
centennial historian reported that teaching kept the sisters in "an habitual state of poverty." In the early years at St. Marys, PA, the combined salary of the community was $25.00 a month, and in Covington, KY, five sisters had to subsist on $17.00 per month. As late as the 1870's, the financial situation in Covington, LA, was dire.

Most of the families could not pay tuition. Total income from tuition was $8.00 per month. The rent of the house, the residence of the sisters, was $25.00 monthly. To make ends meet somewhat, the sisters took in weekend boarders from New Orleans. That meant the sisters would then take their nights' rest at school desks or on the floor of the classroom.

Some communities supplemented their school income by giving private lessons in music and needlework. In Erie, the fee for private lessons was ten cents per week for the first child, five cents for the second child, and no additional charge if more than two children in a family took lessons. Upon their arrival in St. Cloud in 1857, the sisters were not even allowed to teach in the local school. Therefore, music and needlework lessons were the sole means of support for a time. When the community moved to St. Joseph in 1863, again they were barred from teaching by local agitators who were determined to keep their district school free of parochial control. Until 1868, when the villagers conceded to hiring the sisters to teach in their district school, these women had no choice but to beg throughout the countryside and to hire out their services as laundresses and seamstresses for the monks in the nearby monastery. At least one other community of this period also took on the work of laundering and mending for the local monks—St. Scholastica Convent in Newark, NJ.

By 1865, the communities in St. Marys, PA, Erie, Newark, Covington, Chicago, Atchison and St. Cloud each had a "day school along with a resident school for older girls." They were teaching both Protestant and Catholic children, and were growing accustomed to teaching boys as well as girls in their day schools.

By the late 1860's and into the decade of the 1870's, some communities were already involved in building projects to accommodate the expanding enrollments and curricular needs of the girls' academies. St. Benedict Convent in Erie completed a building in December of 1870, in spite of seemingly insurmountable financial difficulties. Under the cloud of a $17,000 debt, "a
staggering amount in the 1870s,” the community forged ahead in its educational endeavor, offering courses in English, Christian Doctrine, Sacred History, drawing, music and embroidery.\textsuperscript{280}

It is rather astonishing to note what Benedictine women were teaching in the girls’ academies of this period, in spite of little or no formal education in their backgrounds. Public exams required of academy students in 1879 indicate that courses were being offered in reading, spelling, Christian doctrine, mathematics, English and German essays, grammar, ancient and modern history, geography, music, translation, philosophy, and instrumental music instruction—in piano, violin, guitar, mandolin and organ.\textsuperscript{281} To upgrade the sisters’ competency to teach, the 1880 \textit{Constitution} inaugurated the “scholasticate,” a course of studies to be offered in motherhouses, comprised of those branches of study required for Catholic schools and academies.\textsuperscript{282}

The \textit{Constitution} included no specific chapter on work and its role in the lives of the sisters following the \textit{Rule of Benedict} in America. It can be assumed that balancing the work of teaching and sustaining community life comprised the major challenge in the lives of pioneer Benedictine women in America, in the same way that members of the post-secularization community of Eichstiitt had to integrate a self-supporting work into a new era of their own history. However, for American Benedictine women of this era and succeeding generations, teaching never did become an adequate means of self-support. By the end of the expansion period, there is evidence that teaching was being offered as a service to the upbuilding of Catholicism in a Protestant land. Reflecting on the role of teaching among pioneer Benedictine women in Arkansas, one author pointed out that the intent of the sisters in providing a bilingual education was not “to maintain a distinctly national culture; they were chiefly concerned with giving the pupils a solid Christian education so necessary for safeguarding the faith of future generations.”\textsuperscript{283}

Before the end of their first three decades in America, Benedictine women were beginning to engage in external works other than teaching. One of the earliest departures from classroom teaching appears in the history of St. Walburg Convent, Covington, KY, when in 1871 sisters were “missioned” to St. John Orphanage in the city.\textsuperscript{284} The work of caring for orphans was also begun in the St. Joseph, MN, community as early as 1875, though informally until 1884.\textsuperscript{285}
In 1878, two Benedictine communities of women began formal work among Native Americans. In May of that year the Ferdinand, IN, community sent four sisters to Fort Totten in Dakota Territory to open a school for girls. It was difficult to convince Dakota women that the sisters had come to "house and feed their children, teach them to sew, to cook in the American way, and to read and write the American language." In November of the same year, the St. Joseph, MN, community sent two sisters to work among the Chippewa at White Earth. Six days after their arrival, "a day school was opened with an enrollment of twelve girls and three boys, which increased to a total of forty the following week."

Caring for orphans and working among Native Americans were largely educational endeavors, and it would be another several years before Benedictine women in America would branch out into other areas of ministry and service in the Church. Somewhat beyond the scope of this study, but important to the total picture of work among Benedictine women in the last half of the nineteenth century, is the fact that St. Benedict's Convent in St. Joseph, MN, was the first community of Benedictines in America to enter the field of health care. On May 3, 1885, the Lamborn Hospital in Bismarck, ND, staffed by five Benedictine women, opened its doors to the public. Two years later, the same community opened a hospital in Duluth, MN, where anti-Catholic sentiment threatened unsuccessfully to crush their efforts. Following suit in June of 1886, two sisters from St. Benedict and St. Scholastica Convent in Chicago were assigned to serve in a miners' hospital in Breckenridge, CO.

At the same time that Benedictine women in the West were moving into new areas of ministry, St. Walburga Convent of Elizabeth, NJ, sent seven of its members to Ecuador, South America. In early summer of 1887, the Bishop of Portoviejo had come to the United States looking for sisters to open schools in his South American diocese. He visited the community in Elizabeth in June and laid his request before Prioress Walburga Hock, who "did not consider the matter unthinkable." She consulted the community, asked for volunteers, and received a willing response from seven members who departed on October 10 of the same year.

Pioneer Benedictine women were no strangers to manual labor, an esteemed value in the Rule of Benedict (48). Nearly all
fifteen houses of the foundation and expansion periods cultivated gardens and fields and engaged in some form of farming. Nepomucene Ludwig remembered the early attempts to grow their own food at St. Marys, PA: "... we worked with axe, with spade, with rake and with the hoe—unabashed. When the potatoes were to be planted or harvested, we proceeded to the fields after school hours, a hoe on our shoulders, to carry on with cultivating or digging the potatoes." 291

In 1872, the community in Ferdinand, IN, bought a farm from a local farmer, and housed two sisters in the renovated farmhouse. Their charge was to operate the farm and to call for further help from the Motherhouse when needed. "They could be seen out in the fields in the early morning, wielding the ax, or hoe, or spade, grubbing, planting, seeding, and in the summer and fall gathering in the harvest. The barns were about one-half mile distant from the convent. So, after milking the few cows they could afford, the sisters had to carry the large pails of milk to the convent kitchen." 292

In the early years of the Fort Smith community, the women themselves labored to clear the land at St. Scholastica's. One of their early chaplains reported that "as soon as school was out, one could see Sister Xavier chopping down trees with an ax. . . . No one worked there, who in the beginning was spared calloused hands and sour sweat." 293 In the spring of 1879, they set about planting the land they owned, but without any equipment to do so, not even a hoe. Undaunted, one sister remarked: "we had to use the tools God gave us to work with—our hands." Eventually farm buildings were built, and until 1885 when the first farmhand was hired, the sisters did most of the field work themselves. Within the first ten years of their founding, the Shoal Creek community witnessed the fruits of their efforts to nurture the land. A candidate who arrived from Switzerland in 1890, described the convent surroundings in a letter to her family: "The garden is planted with fruit trees, vegetables, and flowers. The convent has also added a vineyard and owns pretty much land. The animals consist of two horses, ten cows, six sheep, thirty pigs, and many geese and hens." 294

There is no way to measure the immensity of the work accomplished, and the extent of the influence Benedictine women had upon the immigrant Church during their first thirty years in America. However, statistics preserved in the Catalogue of 1879,
indicate that the Order had professed approximately 415 members, sixty-four of whom had already died. The remainder of them were ministering in their own motherhouses, and in approximately twenty-six other branch houses, where they were serving over 6,000 children in schools and orphanages.

Prayer

Fourteen centuries before the mission of Eichstätt Benedictine women to America, Benedict of Nursia founded a community for one work only—for the sole purpose of seeking God. All that he prescribed in the Rule, down to the minutest detail, found its meaning in the ultimate work of prayer, the opus Dei, to which nothing was to be preferred (43:3). Consequently, centuries of Benedictine women and men have found their raison d'être in their desire to seek God within a community that engages in daily common prayer. It is only appropriate then, that the final chapter of this study should come to a close with a discussion of the value of prayer in the lives of Benedictine women in America from 1852-1881. The motivation to seek God in a life of prayer was the only "brand of glue" that could have held together a pioneer project that seemed doomed from the outset.

The Konstitutionen of 1846 had devoted a lengthy chapter to the "Divine Services (Gottesdienste) and the Spiritual Exercises (geistlichen Übungen)." Appropriately, the chapter began with a reference to chapter 43 of the Rule of Benedict, establishing the priority of "the spiritual exercises as the most important work" in the life of a person who "dedicated herself to the Lord's service, to prefer nothing to the Work of God." The goal of prayer was understood to be "perfection and a closer union with God," and its performance demanded "utmost fervor, attention and devotion. They should always remember that they have not dedicated themselves to the service of human beings but to the service of God's infinite majesty." The intimate connection between a recollected life and the actual recitation of the "holy prayers" was acknowledged.

In advance the sisters should recollect themselves so that their prayers be holy. They should take care that there be nothing in their
hearts, words or behavior contrary to holiness. The more the sisters strive to avoid, even the slightest sins and faults, and curb their inclinations, the easier it will be to pray and the spiritual exercises will become more beneficial for them. When they approach God in prayer they should always do it with purity of heart, combined with a devout and attentive mind, and with reverence and respect.297

A further dimension of prayer in the Benedictine tradition was clearly emphasized in the post-secularization statutes: “When praying the Divine Office (chorgebet) the sisters should be mindful of the fact that they pray in the name of the Church.” Because, as the Konstitutionen explained, “the vast majority of people are prevented from praising and glorifying the Lord because of their worldly affairs,” the special work of Benedictines was “to offer their prayers for the needs of the holy Church, the fatherland, the leaders of the Church and the government, and for the conversion of sinners.”298

The remainder of the chapter dealt with six other components that comprised the “spiritual exercises” in the life of the community. Besides the Divine Office, the “public prayers,” the prayer life of the sisters was to include 1) daily Mass, 2) meditation at the assigned time, according to “the points” read the night before, 3) one half hour of spiritual reading in common, 4) the daily common and particular examinations of conscience, 5) weekly confession, and an extraordinary confession four times a year, and 6) an annual eight to ten day retreat.

Because the community had recently taken on the work of teaching, the Konstitutionen reflected a particular concern for the practice of meditation. The community members were exhorted to be “very faithful to their daily meditation... convinced that meditative prayer is the basis of a religious life and if continuously neglected will ruin the foundation of the monastery.”299

Concluding a rather lengthy discourse on the spiritual value of meditation, the Konstitutionen addressed the teachers of the community specifically.

The teachers especially should devote themselves to meditation with all earnestness and diligence. Because of their work they are exposed to many distractions and occasions for committing faults. By means of these exercises they can obtain that inner collectedness, understanding, wisdom and will power so necessary for fulfilling the demands of their profession. Through meditation the sisters will not only secure the salvation of the children entrusted to their care, by teaching and educating them, but they can achieve even more by their own prayerful and God-pleasing life.300
At St. Walburg's in Eichstatt, the required spiritual exercises punctuated a very long day of work and prayer—from 3:30 a.m. until 8:30 p.m. The first four hours of the convent's day were devoted almost exclusively to prayer, with the praying of Matins and Lauds at 4:00 a.m., meditation and Prime at 5:00 a.m., Mass at 6:00 a.m., followed by breakfast, Terce, Sext and None at 7:00 a.m. The community gathered again at 10:45 a.m. for the particular examen, at 5:30 p.m. for common spiritual reading, and before retiring, for Vespers and Compline at 7:30 p.m.

Maintaining a schedule such as this became nearly impossible for Benedictine women of the New World. The additional frontier rigors of clearing the land, braving the elements in poorly constructed houses, eking out a bare subsistence from infertile soil, and caring for orphans and boarders around the clock, became a burden too heavy to bear. Boniface Wimmer recognized this, but without consulting the women themselves, decided that what needed to give way was the praying of the full monastic office. Thus, within the first several years of the nuns' arrival in 1852, Wimmer of his own accord dispensed the nuns from praying Matins. And as early as 1858, the American Abbot formally petitioned Rome to decree that Benedictine women in America should pray the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin instead of the Divine Office.

It appears that Boniface Wimmer received no clear answer to this request until 1866, when the Sacred Congregation decreed that "on ferial days the Office of the B.V.M. be recited instead of the Divine Office." The implication was that the Divine Office was to be continued in full on Sundays and feastdays. Shortly after Rome's decision on this issue, Wimmer admitted that he had acted on his own authority and that the sisters themselves had not wanted the dispensation.

I insisted that the sisters pray only the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin on weekdays instead of the breviary, and they [Rome] gladly permitted that. I did that from my own volition; however I considered it advisable and necessary. I have already said that the sisters did not ask me to do that; they are such zealous devotees of the Office that they would rather pray two Offices than one but now it has been permitted by the cardinals and by the pope. I have it in writing in my hands and you may introduce it at once.

It is often hastily concluded that the seven houses of Benedictine women in America, founded by 1866, immediately and with ready compliance abandoned the Divine Office. There is some
evidence to the contrary. And in view of the wide diversity of practice prevalent for decades to come, the researcher is compelled to ask whether there ever was a period in the history of Benedictine women in America when the Divine Office was categorically abandoned by all houses.\(^5\) It is not even known how widely the 1866 decree was promulgated before 1881. Since the letter from the Sacred Congregation was addressed to Boniface Wimmer, it is possible that he reported the decision to each of the then-existing houses, as he had done in the above letter to the Prioress of Erie. A question remains, however, about the binding nature of a communication made through Wimmer, since after 1859 Benedictine women had been made subject to the jurisdiction of their local ordinaries.

In actuality, Benedictine women of the founding and expansion periods did some adapting of their own, not always in full compliance with formalities between Boniface Wimmer and Rome. Some continued to pray the Divine Office after 1866, and others agreed to the Marian Office on work days but retained the full monastic office on days when more time was available.

The community in St. Cloud had from the beginning desired to chant the Divine Office but circumstances in pioneer Minnesota had made that impossible for their first three years there. By 1860, the number in the community had increased to twelve and it was possible for the first time to pray the Divine Office “with the liturgical solemnity to which the older members had been accustomed in St. Walburga’s.”\(^6\) This practice continued for two years after the 1866 decree, under the leadership of Prioress Willibalda. However, when in 1868 Willibalda was deposed by Abbot Seidenbusch, her successor, Prioress Antonia Hermann, substituted the Marian Office for the Divine Office on ferial days.\(^7\) The community retained the full monastic office on Sundays and feastdays until 1881 when Prioress Scholastica Kerst dropped it entirely in favor of the Little Office.\(^8\)

The early handwritten histories of St. Benedict and Scholastica Convent in Chicago are silent about the status of the Divine Office until 1903. Suitberta Vollmer was elected prioress on August 11 of that year and shortly after a visit with Archbishop Quigley, she “announced tersely that it was his wish that the sisters give up the recitation of the Divine Office and recite instead the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin. The reason given for the change was ‘pressure of work.’”\(^9\) It would be too hasty to
conclude that the Chicago community retained the full monastic office from the year of its founding in 1861 until 1903. On the other hand, given the diversity of practice during those early decades, it is a possibility.\textsuperscript{310}

The substitution of the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary for the traditional Divine Office was inherently problematic for Benedictine women in America from the beginning. The content of both forms of common prayer consisted of psalms and readings from Scripture, the basic elements prescribed by Benedict in his \textit{Rule}. Thus, at the level of the heart of their prayer it could be argued that Benedictine women lost nothing essential to their ancient and cherished tradition of prayer when the form changed. The Little Office differed from the traditional Divine Office only in length and format. However, from the perspective of some male monastics and other ecclesiastical authorities of the time, the substitution of the Little Office resulted in the loss of their Benedictine monastic identity.\textsuperscript{311} In the judgment of these churchmen, monastic identity ultimately hinged upon the recitation of the full Divine Office. They reasoned that since Benedictine women in America were praying the Little Office, as were other apostolic congregations of sisters in America, they could not be considered "real daughters" of Benedict. In this context, the absence of the traditional Divine Office became a heartache for Benedictine women for decades to come.\textsuperscript{312}

The heartache intensified after the \textit{Constitution} of 1880 clearly prescribed that "the sisters shall daily recite in Latin the \textit{Cursus Marianus} and on Sundays and Feastdays the \textit{Officium Canonicum}, or the fifteen decades of the Rosary."\textsuperscript{313} The consequence of this seemingly innocuous statement was the long "labor of retrieval," the struggle of American Benedictine women "to reclaim their heritage of praise," which began as early as 1883.\textsuperscript{314} That struggle began with the community in Atchison, KS, aided by their Benedictine Bishop, Louis Fink. In 1878, he wrote to Rome expressing his concern about several matters pertaining to the Benedictine women in his diocese. About the issue of the Divine Office he wrote: "In my heart I keep thinking that they are not really nuns because they no longer take solemn vows or go to the Divine Office as was customary for Benedictine sisters."\textsuperscript{315} Rome responded with interest and suggested that a constitution be drafted in which his concerns could be addressed.\textsuperscript{316} At some point within this process, between 1878 and 1883, Atchison's
proposed constitutions were sent to Rome, and there underwent a two-year scrutiny. A committee of four from the Sacred Congregation examined the constitutions, and the result was “to put back into their hands the Office book, to place them, pioneers or no, back in the mainstream of Benedictine life.” They were granted a “Decree of Praise” which asserted, among other things, that “the substantial law of Benedictine life was the performance of the work of God, nightly and daily.” The same author went on to report that within several years after Rome’s response, the abbot of the nearby monastery began “to teach the sisters again to say the Divine Office and contributions of old, new, and various-sized office books poured into the convent from various abbeys.” The Divine Office was officially resumed in the Atchison house on July 26, 1892.

One tradition in the Tulsa, OK, community holds that the Divine Office was prayed there from its beginning in 1879. It was remembered that Paula O’Reilly, their foundress, “always had her office book with her, and prayed when she was on the train or absent from the office in any way.” On this account, the previous claim rested. However, one member who entered St. Joseph Convent in Tulsa in 1892 recalled that the community was then praying the Little Office rather than the Divine Office. Still another member reported that when she entered in 1898, the Divine Office was being prayed.

The “labor of retrieval” was a considerably longer process for the other houses founded before 1881. Community annals readily recorded the dates of the restoration of the Divine Office in their houses, testimony to the significance of that event in their histories. There is also ample evidence that many of the women of the foundation and expansion periods deeply regretted the suspension of the Divine Office and “for years they kept up a constant prayer for the revival of the full monastic office.” The rejoicing that commenced in the St. Joseph, MN, community on Christmas day, 1926, when the restored Office was prayed for the first time in fifty-eight years, was proof enough that “the love of the Opus Dei had never died out in the community.”

It has been essential to the thesis of this study to acknowledge the complexity of the issue of American Benedictine women and their history relative to the praying of the monastic office during their first seventy years or so in this country. Because of the circumstances described above, plus the ambiguous issues of
“abandoned” enclosure and solemn vows, churchmen and male monastics for decades failed to recognize the true Benedictine character of women following the Rule of Benedict in America. For instance, in January of 1880 Bishop Ullathorne, O.S.B., of Birmingham, England, stated what he thought of Benedictine women in America in a letter to the Prioress in Erie.

From all that I have heard about Benedictine women of the United States ... you do not appear to be true religious in the canonical sense of the term, but rather a pious Institute, bearing the Benedictine name. ... If you ultimately contemplate the full Benedictine observance, you will have to look repeatedly to the Divine Office as part of that observance.  

Seventeen years later, the newly appointed Abbot Primate expressed similar sentiments in a letter to the Prioress of Pittsburgh: "I beg to say that if you want to be real daughters of our holy Father, St. Benedict, you ought to take up the Office of the Breviary Monastic."

It is not our purpose here to argue the true, consistent character and identity of Benedictine women in America from a canonical standpoint. Others have attempted precisely that. Rather, the task of this study has been to explore the self-understanding of pioneer American Benedictine women as that is revealed in their lived experience. In the area of prayer, as in the many other areas of their way of life examined in the previous sections of this chapter, American Benedictine women experienced a kind of adaptation that reshaped the essential elements of their ancient charism into a new form. The American form demanded other, though faithful expressions of their cherished tradition. Evidence suggests that in their hearts pioneer Benedictine women did not believe that they had ever abandoned the most sacred element of their lives, the opus Dei. For most, the format changed to the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, but the spirit in which it was prayed remained truly the Work of God.

In addition to the chapter on the “Divine Office” in the 1880 Constitution, eight other chapters described additional components of the spirituality and prayer life of Benedictine women between 1852 and 1881. Benedict’s teaching on lectio divina (RB 48) was made practical in a chapter entitled, “Meditation and Spiritual Reading.” One half hour for meditation and another for spiritual reading was to be built into the schedule as had been the custom in Eichstätt. No specific instructions were given for the
period of meditation, but the reading material for table and com-
mon spiritual reading was carefully prescribed. The Rule of
Benedict was to be read in choir after Prime, and the books re-
quired for table reading were the New Testament, the Martyr-
ology, Lives of the Saints, and "other books of edification and
suitable instruction, as may be selected by the Prioress or Sub-
prioress. . . . In order to make a proper selection of books for
spiritual reading, the Prioress shall from time to time consult the
confessor or Bishop." 328 Interestingly, one other title was specified:
"A chapter of the 'Imitation of Christ' shall be read daily at the
beginning of the general spiritual reading." 329

Daily celebration of the Mass was prescribed in chapter XIII,
however reception of holy communion was reserved for Sundays,
Tuesdays, Thursdays, all first and second class feasts of the
Church or of the Order, the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the
first Friday of every month, the feast of the Scapulars of Mt
Carmel, and once during the Forty Hours' Adoration. Candidates,
postulants and novices were restricted in their reception of com-
munion to Sundays, Tuesdays, feasts of the Church, and first class
feasts of the Order. The confessor possessed the prerogative to
"forbid to individuals certain communion days for a time when
he may find it necessary or prudent, according to the teachings of
the holy Church, or may allow an extra communion occasionally
to individual sisters who may be specially furthered in piety by
it." 330

Confessors for houses of Benedictine women were appointed
by their local ordinaries, and they were required to confess
weekly. Extraordinary confessors were provided during the Em-
ber weeks. 331 On a daily basis, however, "the daughters of St.
Benedict" were required to "make two examinations of con-
sience: the general examination at the conclusion of the last com-
munity exercises in the evening, and the particular examination
before dinner." 332

Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament was prescribed for
those days designated in the regulations of the Diocese, as well as
on the special feasts of Benedict, Scholastica, Gertrude the Great,
All Saints of the Order, and Maurus and Placid. 333 The feast of
Scholastica was additionally graced with the annual ceremony of
the renewal of vows. The sisters prepared themselves for this
event by spending the previous day in silence and meditation. 334
An annual retreat and monthly days of recollection were further
requirements of their spiritual program as was noted in an earlier section on the value of silence.335

Benedict in his *Rule* had devoted an entire chapter to “The Observance of Lent” (49), in which he admonished his followers to view their life’s journey as a “continuous Lent.” Appropriately, the 1880 *Constitution* prescribed that on Ash Wednesday the community was to gather for the general Chapter of Faults, during which chapter forty-nine of the *Rule* was to be read to the community by the Prioress. Moreover, the Prioress was to exhort and encourage the sisters “to pass the season of Lent in all recollection and piety in a penitential spirit.”

... The sisters, however, should bear in mind that piety does not consist in extraordinary works but in fidelity to God in little things, such as the faithful performance of their duties, humility and recollection of the holy presence of God and bearing the daily trials with patience and resignation.336

Just as Benedict had advised his monks to make known to the abbot what they intended to do during Lent by way of increasing their “usual measure of service” (49:8), so too were the sisters required to write down for the Prioress their intended plan of “good works.” Doing this would assure “the merit of obedience” and “prevent self-will,” at the same time that it would give the Prioress the opportunity to “approve or change them according to prudence.”337

The nine-chapter section devoted to the spiritual life of Benedictine women in the *Constitution* of 1880 closed with a caution about the role of “Special Private Devotions” in the life of the community: “Care, however, should be had that no one neglects her duties of obedience and interior recollection by attaching undue importance to outward and private devotions.” Superior over all other devotions to the Blessed Sacrament, the Sacred Heart, the Virgin Mary, Benedict and Scholastica, other saints, and the rosary, was the Divine Office and the desire to “cherish a spirit of prayer.”338

In the decades that followed the period under study here, concern about the proliferation of non-liturgical prayers and devotions that had become so much a part of the late nineteenth-century frontier spirituality of Benedictine women in America was often expressed.339 The more severe critics among those concerned judged their spirituality as non-monastic and became increasingly reluctant to view Benedictine women in the New World as the “real daughters” of Benedict of Nursia.
In this century there are still historically astute voices that question the monastic authenticity of Benedictine women's experience in nineteenth-century America.

Whether one wants to accept the Americanization model as fit for the experience of monastic orders of women in this country or not, the historical evidence is too compelling to deny the fact that the American Catholic Church in the last century was so preoccupied with providing for the pastoral needs of its faithful that even the most committed members of these orders were forced to compromise their contemplative ideals for a time because of the pressing needs of the moment.340

While Rippinger’s historical judgment may be accurate in the face of “historical evidence too compelling to deny,” its significance wavers when confronted with the lived experience of pioneer Benedictine women in whom the spirit of Benedict lived in the form of a “love stern as death." The process of Americanization and the reality of compromise are useful and valid models for historical interpretation. But they are limited and inadequate when the historical observer must finally withhold judgment and acknowledge the creative Spirit of God acting in human history to create something new. A woman historian, equally astute in her interpretation of nineteenth-century historical data, captures a truth more important in the lived experience of Benedictine women than the question of monastic compromise.

Prayer, public and private, was always of prime importance in the lives of Benedictine contemplative sisters who crossed the ocean to become missionaries. Whether the nuns were in an unplastered, unfurnished Minnesota garret, two-room shed on a Dakota homestead plot, or another cold frontier cabin, they could be found at prayer. Often it may have been at odd hours, but gather together they would. They assembled to recite or chant the Hours of the Office, meditate together or privately, with Scripture or some devotional book . . . [they may have] found themselves saying their prayers in a former wayside tavern in the Black Hills town of Sturgis, but they prayed nonetheless.341

The new shape of Benedictine life among women in America during the final decades of the nineteenth century bore an integrity of its own. It embodied within itself the essential values of the Rule of Benedict, and expressed them in a time-tested way of life uniquely stable yet continually open to changed times and altered circumstances.
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Notes


3 Sutera, True Daughters, p. 44.


5 Mary Ewens, “Women in the Convent,” p. 17.

6 Ibid., p. 27.


8 Colman Barry, Worship and Work, p. 39.


10 See appendix 14.

11 Introductory letter to Konstitutionen, 1846, p. 1. For an English translation of the full text of the letter, see appendix 15.

12 Constitution, p. 2.


15 A preliminary survey of the libraries and archives of some of the early Benedictine houses of women under study here does reveal some interesting holdings relative to Benedictine history and spirituality, published between 1752 and 1896. See appendix 16. After 1896, the


17 July 24, 1857. Girgen, pp. 86–87. Presumably, the Statutes to which he referred were those of the Bavarian Branch of the Cassinese Congregation. His appeal to history in the portion of the letter excerpted appears to be somewhat uninformed. It is true that during the reform movement of Cluny in the eleventh and twelfth centuries many Benedictine convents came under the direct control of Cluny’s abbot and were obliged to keep Cluny’s constitutions. Similarly, during the Cistercian reform, many Benedictine women’s houses were united with Citeaux. Later, some convents also participated in some of the new Benedictine congregations that resulted from the conciliar decrees of Lateran, Vienne, and Constance—the English Congregation, the German Bursfeld Congregation, and the Italian St. Justina of Padua Congregation. Except for some affiliations with congregations of men, “the congregation system of governance was never applied to houses of women in an organized way. Instead, the convents were generally either under the exclusive direction of some particular abbey, through whose influence they were established; or the convents were subject to the jurisdiction of the bishop of the diocese in which they were situated” (Olheiser, *From Autonomy to Federations*, pp. 53–55). St. Walburg’s unbroken history of episcopal jurisdiction testifies to the fact that the Eichstatt convent had never belonged to a congregation, and the women from there would have found Wimmer’s imposition of both the congregational structure and its statutes exceedingly foreign to their tradition.

18 SSPA, Chicago, IL; SGMA, Ridgely, MD; SWMAE, Elizabeth, NJ; MSBMA, Erie, PA.


20 cf. appendix 17 and appendix 14. Two crucial questions regarding the 1854 edition remain unanswered: 1) Is the date accurate? The date appears to have been added much later. One source alludes to a revised set of statutes for St. Walburg Convent in Eichstatt approved by Bishop Georg von Oettl in 1852 (Preface of *Regel und Konstitutionen*, 1937, SBCA 3:1-2-1, f.5). Might this 1854 edition be von Oettl’s 1852 constitution? 2) More importantly, did the 1854 edition originate in America as an adapted version, or was it sent to St. Marys, PA, from the European motherhouse?

The period of the 1880s had been a time of “overemphasis on external good works at the expense of the monastic spirit” in the Benedictine community at St. Joseph, MN. In contrast, the 1890s witnessed decisive efforts on the part of the new prioress to return to a “better balance between ora and labora” (McDonald, p. 148). Willibalda’s request appears to have been part of that effort—a rather late instance of looking toward the European motherhouse for guidance during a period of reform and renewal.


Ibid., p. 78. Schuster cites the full text of the letter on pp. 77–78.

Baska, p. 126.

Ibid., p. 127. The chronicle of St. Walburg Convent in Covington, however, states that “we unexpectedly received word on July 29 [1879] that the chapter would have to be postponed on account of the illness of the Rt. Rev. Abbot and other reasons” (“Chronik der Inwohnerinnen des Klosters St. Walburga, Covington, Kentucky, 1863–1912,” SWMA).

Minutes of the Meeting, SVAA; see also Baska, p. 129.

See appendix 14 for the Table of Contents of the 1880 Constitution.

Scholastica Kerst, Prioress in St. Joseph, MN, from 1880 to 1889, became the leading spokeswoman against a common novitiate. In a letter to Evangelista Kremmeter on November 12, 1882, she expressed her objection, giving the following reasons: “I. The difference in climate is too great; 2. There would be such an amount of travel required; 3. One novitiate would encumber us with such expenses that we could not possibly meet; 4. Not one of the houses has, or will have, for many years to come suitable buildings for that purpose, besides many other concerns of less weight which might however come into consideration” (Original, MSSA, cited in Baska, pp. 130–131). She went on to suggest that each motherhouse already having its own novitiate should retain it, but if several houses wished to unite in their novitiate efforts, the question should be decided by the next general chapter.
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37 Sutera, p. 77. See pp. 73–82 of True Daughters for a succinct summary of these “early efforts to congregate.”

38 Chronik, SWMA.

39 The Chicago community had already implemented this change in headdress in 1873. In that year, advised by Bishop Foley, two members of the Chicago community had gone to England to study the prayer life, customs and dress of the English Benedictine nuns at Atherstone, Warwickshire. Some time after Ottilia Hoeveler and Frances Suess returned, the community’s headdress was modified. Genevieve Harrison, “Where There Was Need,” p. 36, SSPA.

40 In fact, they did not meet again until 1908, when a new effort to achieve canonical sanction from Rome was underway.

41 September 23, 1885, SBCA 1:5-4-1, f.2.

42 September 15, 1885, SBCA 1:5-4-1, f.2.

43 SBCA 1:5-4-1, f.2.

44 This copy predates the general chapter in Chicago, 1881. Baska reports (p. 126) that Bishop Fink had completed the draft in 1877. So it is possible that since Covington, KY, had been the original chosen site for the first meeting of prioresses and delegates, a preliminary copy had been sent to that house before 1881.

45 MSBMA; copy also in SBCA, ephem.file.

46 Constitutions for the Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict of St. Benedict’s Convent, St. Joseph, Minnesota, 1887, SBCA 2-2-2, f.1. This constitution was printed the same year by WM. P. Remer, Ptr., St. Cloud, MN, SBCA 2-2-2, f.2.

47 McDonald, p. 144.


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53 Ibid.

54 *Circa Pastoralis*, 1566.

55 Ewens, pp. 19–20. This situation for women religious with simple vows continued until the year 1900 when the papal bull, *Conditae a Christo*, finally recognized them as *bona fide* religious.

56 Notes from an address to the community, SBCA 3:1-2-1.

57 *Konstitutionen*, pp. 7–16.


59 Ibid., pp. 18–20.

60 The *Rule of Benedict* contains no specific chapter or chapters on the topic of chastity.

61 *Konstitutionen*, pp. 23–24.


63 Ibid., p. 56.

64 SBCA, original, #16-1.

65 Ewens, p. 202. The orders of women in America professing solemn vows at this time were the religious of the Sacred Heart, The Visitandines and the Carmelites.

66 Wimmer to Barnabo, July 11, 1858. Original, SVAA. On March 21, 1857, Wimmer had already received the *solemn* vows of nine women at St. Marys, PA.

67 Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 123.

68 July 25, 1859. See ch. III n. 163.

69 See appendix 3.


72 Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 185.

73 These three documents reflected a short-lived practice at St. Scholastica Convent in Newark, NJ, during the years 1858 and 1859.

74 Mechtild Richter, February 10, 1858, SJMA.

75 Theresa Krug, January 6, 1864, SSPA. See also Suitbert Vollmer, September 19, 1872, SSPA.

76 See vow documents of Benedicta Riepp, SBCA.

77 Chronik, SWMA; Eng. trans., pp. 4–11.

78 Kalt, *Das Benediktinerinnen Kloster St. Scholastika*. Eng. trans., p. 38, SSMA.

79 Cited by Schuster, p. 55.
80 Ibid.

81 Borgerding, p. 13. Theresa Marthaler’s vow documents are dated January 6, 1864 and August 22, 1870. A note appended to the later document explains that she “made her perpetual vows when the time of noviceship had expired, as it was supposed at the time, that not solemn but perpetual vows could be taken after one year’s novitiate. Later on, however, ecclesiastical superiors advised the respective sisters to make perpetual vows, as triennial vows had already been in force” (SBCA, PF). A comparison of the two documents reveals no clear specification of the nature or duration of the vows in either profession statement. The only difference in the sentences naming the vows, is in the order of them: “stability, conversion of my morals, obedience, poverty and chastity” (1864), and “chastity, poverty, obedience, stability and conversion of my morals” (1870).

82 These designations appear in the vow documents of Anastasia Kieckhoefer who professed her simple vows on February 10, 1885, and perpetual vows on January 27, 1888, in Chicago. SSPA.

83 p. 12, #2.
84 Ibid., #1.
85 Ibid., #4.
86 Ibid., #6.
87 This phenomenon will be discussed in detail in the next section of this chapter under the heading “Benedictine Organization.”

88 Constitution, p. 12–13, #5 and 7.
89 Ibid., p. 21.
90 Ibid., pp. 22–23.
91 Ibid., p. 14, #16.
92 Ibid., p. 13.
93 Ibid., #9.
94 Ibid., #14.
95 Ibid., p. 14, #15.
96 Ibid., p. 12, #3. It is doubtful that this prescription was ever followed with any kind of consistency. The official language of the Roman Catholic Church, Latin, appears to have been used for the writing of Benedictine vow formulas up to Vatican Council II.
97 RB 1980 1:2,13.
98 Schuster, p. 21.
99 The term “depending houses” came into official use in the catalogue of 1879. The 1880 Constitution refers to them as “branch houses.”
These numbers are derived from statistics recorded in the *Catalogue* of 1879.

Morkin and Seigel, p. 129.

Borgerding, p. 6.


Fallon, *Waters of Promise*, p. 5.


Corporation Book: 1867–1922, p. 11, SWMA.


Corporation Book: 1867–1922, p. 13, SWMA.

Chronik, SWMA. Eng. trans., p. 8. In 1903, the independent New Orleans community moved to Covington, LA, where it remained until its dissolution eighty-four years later, in 1987.

Kalt, p. 33.

Sanders, “As Green Leaves,” p. 98.

Morkin and Seigel, p. 159.

Ibid.

*Catalogue*, 1879, p. 11.

Mary Jane Coogan, “Problems in the Education of American Catholic Teachers,” paper presented at the spring meeting of the American Catholic Historical Association, University of Notre Dame, 6 April, 1979, p. 2.

The nine communities responsible for dependent houses were: St. Marys, PA (3), Erie, PA (2), St. Cloud/St. Joseph, MN (5), Chicago, IL (2), Atchison, KS (2), Ferdinand, IN (6), Elizabeth, NJ (1), Pittsburgh, PA (3), and New Orleans (2).

This rather awkwardly stated sentence constituted the entirety of chapter 27 of the *Constitution*, entitled “Branch Houses,” p. 24.

Ibid., Chapter 33, “Matters Subject to the Decision of the General Chapter,” #5, p. 28. It should be noted here that the concept of “general chapter” was also a recommended innovation that could be treated in this section on Benedictine organization. Since there have already been several allusions in this study to the nineteenth-century question of the feasibility of Benedictine women in America congregating, and since a congregation and general chapter did not officially materialize until 1922, the issue will not be treated here. Chapters 28–33 (see appendix 14 for titles) of the 1880 *Constitution*, dealing with the proposed Congregation of St. Scholastica, did not reflect the desire of the women themselves but rather the longstanding plan of Boniface Wimmer, articulated by Bishop Louis Fink, O.S.B.
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119 Catalogue, 1903, pp. 11–12.
120 See appendix 14 for titles of the first seven chapters.
121 Ewens, p. 253.
122 p. 3. There is a close correlation between these areas of jurisdiction and Benedicta Riepp’s “Points of Difference” with Abbot Wimmer, submitted to Rome in 1857. See Girgen, pp. 110–113.
123 Ibid., #2.
124 Ibid., p. 4, #7.
126 Chapters 13 and 14, pp. 60–70.
127 Ibid., p. 68.
128 p. 5, #1.
129 Ibid., #5.
130 The latter topic will be taken up in the next section of this chapter.
131 Campbell, A Love That Impels, p. 43.
132 Campbell, Chosen for Peace, p. 28.
133 Ibid., p. 27.
134 “History of St. Scholastica Priory,” p. 2, SSPA.
136 McDonald, With Lamps Burning, pp. 72–73.
137 Ibid., pp. 145–146.
138 “Autobiography: November 7, 1849–October 9, 1901,” SBCA.
139 Johnston, The Fruits of His Works, p. 15.
140 Morkin and Seigel, Wind in the Wheat, p. 171.
141 100th St. Marys, n.p.
143 Fallon, Waters of Promise, p. 6. Incomplete records in many of these houses accounts for lack of information needed to determine if these long-term prioresses ever came up for re-election through formal processes within their Chapters. The “Chapter Proceedings” of the Covington house, however, carefully document each re-election of Walburga Saelinger. Ibid., pp. 13ff.
144 Constitution, chapter V, p. 7.
145 Ibid.
146 Ibid., chapter II, p. 5.
147 Ibid., chapter VII, p. 8.
Sanders, "As Green Leaves," p. 50. See also Kalt, Das Benediktinerinnen Kloster St. Scholastika, Eng. trans., pp. 34-37. Kalt's description of the same ceremony is decidedly clerical in tone, interspersed with several comments about how a convent election is "naturally not surrounded with the former festive ceremonies which distinguish such an action at an ecclesiastical election (p.34)." He closes his account of the 1887 election with a rather lengthy discourse on the role of a prioress and her necessary qualifications.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid., pp. 50-51.

Ibid., p. 51. It is significant to note here, that Meinrada Lex had not yet professed perpetual vows at the time of her election as prioress. She had professed her first vows in Ferdinand fifteen years before, but her motherhouse had waited nineteen years after its foundation, in 1867, for the episcopal permission necessary for its members to profess perpetual vows. The permission was granted on August 13, 1886, but the members living in Shoal Creek had not yet returned to Ferdinand for their final profession. Thus it was necessary for Meinrada to travel to Ferdinand immediately after her election, where she made a retreat and was perpetually professed on June 4, 1887. Obviously, circumstances had dictated a departure from the 1880 Constitution, which had legislated that a prioress needed to have professed perpetual vows "about ten years" before her election.

Respectively, Theresa Krug (b. Baltimore, MD); Isidore Pilz (b. Pittsburgh, Pa); Aloysia Bath (b. Addison, WI); Ottilia Hoeveler (b. Pittsburgh, PA); Paula O'Reilly (b. Birmingham, PA). Data on six other foundations of this period, relative to their first American-born prioresses, follows in chronological order of election: Newark/Ridgely, Dolorosa Berg, 1884 (b. Butler, PA); Atchison, Theresa Moser, 1884 (b. Carrolltown, PA); Ferdinand, Scholastica Stockman, 1890 (b. Covington, KY); Erie, Josepha Miller, 1902 (b. St. Marys, PA); Fort Smith, AR, Agatha Ehalt, 1908 (b. Lanesville, IN); Elizabeth, NJ, Regina O'Donnell, 1913 (b. Pennsylvania).


The phrase, "principal members," most likely refers to the officials of the community—the subprioress, treasurer, secretary, procuratrix—who comprised the community council.

SWMA, p. 19.

Chronik, SWMA, Eng. trans., p. 22. This source further records her assignments to various branch houses of the community, an allusion to poor health in 1895, and her subsequent departure from the community on May 31, 1900.

Sharum, p. 15.


pp. 61–62.

Ibid., pp. 67–68.

Ibid., p. 66.

Ibid., p. 68.

Only the very broad framework of the Konstitutionen's seven chapters on the acceptance of new members can be sketched here. The detail of these chapters is extensive, meticulous, and most revealing, covering a total of twenty-six pages in the German text. See pp. 60–84.

Entrants Record: 1852–1891, SBCA.

Archives Newsletter 1:8 (April 1979): 29–30. SSPA.

Campbell, A Love That Impels, p. 47.

Borgerding, p. 6.

Kalt, p. 38.

p. 70.

Borgerding, p. 12.

MEMOIRS, p. 4.

Morkin and Seigel, Wind in the Wheat, p. 58.

p. 23.

The practice of “culpa” will be discussed in the following section on common observances.

Constitution, p. 11.

Ibid.

Ibid., pp. 11–12.


p. 10.

Baska, pp. 130–131.

p. 12.


Constitution, p. 21.

Konstitutionen, pp. 56–59.

McDonald, With Lamps Burning, pp. 43–44.

Ibid., pp. 300–301, n. 18.

SWMA, Eng. trans., p. 3.

Corporation Book, SWMA, p. 12.

Johnston, The Fruit of His Works, p. 159.

Morkin and Seigel, Wind in the Wheat, p. 159.

pp. 21–23.

Mary Ewens, O.P., “The Double Standard of the American Sister,” in An American Church: Essays on the Americanization of the Catholic Church, ed. David J. Alvarez (Moraga, CA: St. Mary’s College of California, 1979), p. 23. The Second Plenary Council of Baltimore (1866) gave momentary recognition to the unique problem of Benedictine women in America, with regard to their tradition of solemn vows and strict enclosure. “Some [religious communities of females in the United States] were formerly subject to the law of enclosure, as they took solemn vows. Such are, for instance, the Benedictine nuns. . . . With regard to these, we ask, are they obliged to observe enclosure by virtue of their rule, that prescribes it?” The Council’s solution was to declare “rules of such religious communities” not binding in this regard, and to require that “all religious communities of females in America have but simple vows, except the Visitandines.” S. Smith, Notes on the Sacred Plenary Council of Baltimore, pp. 335–337.
Statuten des Klosters St. Walburg nach der Regel unsers heiligen Vaters Benediktus, 1854. SBCA, pp. 221–222.

Ibid.

Borgerding, p. 9.

McDonald, p. 66.

100th St. Marys, n.p.

Morkin and Seigel, pp. 103–105.

Borgerding, p. 9.

Sharum, p. 11.

Johnston, p. 23.


p. 98.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 99 and 102.

p. 21.

Ibid.

p. 85. The reference to a period of decline in the observance of the Chapter of Faults probably dates back to the period of the Enlightenment, when Benedictinism was influenced by the “general religious las­situde” of the time. See Hilpisch, A History of Benedictine Nuns, p. 78 ff.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 86.

For the titles of these chapters (21–27), see appendix 14.

Konstitutionen, pp. 87–90.

Ibid., pp. 90–92.

Ibid., pp. 92–94.


p. 38.

Ibid., p. 39.

p. 18. The phrase, “sooner than usual,” suggests that a rule of si­lence was in place on non-Lenten days, although the document nowhere specifies one.

Ibid., pp. 16–17.

Ibid., pp. 18–19.


p. 20.
For some specific references to lay sisters as distinct from choir sisters see *Konstitutionen*, pp. 27, 68, 93.

250 St. Scholastica's Convent, Atchison, KS, p. 42.

251 Convent of the Immaculate Conception, Ferdinand, IN, p. 48.

252 Borgerding, p. 13. McDonald, the centennial historian, noted that the distinction between choir and lay sister was finally abolished in St. Joseph on December 11, 1894, upon the request of Bishop Martin Marty. *With Lamps Burning*, p. 151.

253 Kalt, p. 33.


255 p. 5.

256 Ibid., p. 15.


258 Ibid., p. 33.

259 Ibid., p. 32.

260 There is some ambiguity in the document, however, about what parts of the school were within or outside the enclosure. Within the short span of several paragraphs in the chapter on "Enclosure," all those involved with the school were given permission to "leave the enclosure" for as long as necessary, and yet the boarding school was "considered enclosure" (p. 59).

261 *Konstitutionen*, p. 70.

262 Ibid., p. 74.

263 Ibid., p. 70 and 74.

264 Ibid., p. 79.

265 Ibid., p. 81.
266 Ibid., p. 36.
267 Ibid., p. 42–43.
268 Ibid., p. 42.
269 Ibid., pp. 44–45.
270 See chapters 10, 28, 29, and 31 of Konstitutionen, 1846.
272 Morkin and Seigel, p. 145.
275 Morkin and Seigel, pp. 103–104, 128.
276 McDonald, p. 60. The refusals to hire the sisters to teach in St. Cloud and St. Joseph were the result of four main issues among the townspeople: 1) The sisters did not know English well enough to satisfy the demands of the state government. 2) Playground supervision was virtually impossible for cloistered teachers. 3) Maintaining discipline in the classroom was a major problem for women unaccustomed to teaching boys. 4) The old Eichstätt custom of changing the classroom teacher every hour, a style of management suited to a Bavarian girls’ boarding school, was alien to the school system in vogue in America at the time (pp. 54–55).
277 Campbell, A Love That Impels, p. 45. The community continued this work until 1963.
278 Wimmer to Ludwig, April 15, 1865. Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 182.
279 100th St. Marys, n.p.; “History,” p. 2, SSPA.
280 Morkin and Seigel, pp. 148–150.
285 McDonald, With Lamps Burning, pp. 122–123.
288 Ibid., p. 126, 112–113.
289 “History,” p. 3, SSPA.
Campbell, *Chosen for Peace*, pp. 58–59. Within five years, the community had sent a total of twenty sisters to Ecuador, to work in five different locations. Within seven months of the first departure, the community had given more than $1,050 in financial support of the South American mission (p. 60).

MEMOIRS, p. 4.

Dudine, p. 27.

Kalt, p. 11, 13.

Ibid., p. 47.

The term, *opus Dei*, is hallowed in the Benedictine tradition. Benedict’s use of the term at times connotes the whole monastic enterprise of seeking God. At other times the “Work of God” is a clear reference to the *divini officii*, the Divine Office.


Ibid., pp. 26–27.

Ibid., pp. 27–28.

Ibid., pp. 28–29.

Ibid., pp. 29–30.

McDonald, p. 18.


Wimmer to Burkhard, June 28, 1866. Eng. trans., Girgen, p. 188.

It may be concluded from the 1880 *Constitution*, which made the Marian Office normative, that that is precisely what happened. However, that *Constitution* was never officially adopted. Rather, the priorresses considered it a sample and readily adapted it at their discretion to meet the needs of particular houses.

McDonald, p. 43.

Ibid., p. 66.


There is no precise information about when the Divine Office was replaced by the Marian Office at St. Marys, Erie, Newark, Covington, and Atchison, the other houses founded before 1866. And a question remains about Ferdinand, Bristow, Elizabeth, Pittsburgh, Covington, LA, Nauvoo, Fort Smith, and Tulsa, the other communities in our study: Since these houses were founded after 1866, was the Little Office prescribed for them from their beginnings?

This issue will be further discussed and exemplified in succeeding paragraphs.


Murphy, p. 173.

Louis Fink to the Pope, Latin original in Archdiocesan Archives, cited by Schuster in *The Meaning of the Mountain*, p. 78.

This became the first draft of the *Constitution of St. Scholastica for the Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict in the United States of America*, 1880.

Schuster, p. 79.

Ibid., p. 79–80.

Ibid., p. 80.


Notes concerning the Divine Office by S. M. Placida, September 13, 1965, SJMAT.

Some available dates indicate how far into the twentieth century many communities had to wait: Chicago, 1916; St. Cloud/St. Joseph, 1926; Covington, KY, 1936; Fort Smith, 1949; Nauvoo, 1953.

McDonald, p. 138.


Original, MSBMA. Copy, SSPA.


See for instance, Sutera, *True Daughters*.

Chapter XVII, pp. 18–19.

Ibid., p. 18. Along with Francis de Sales, Alphonsus Liguori, and Frederick William Faber, Thomas Kempis was one of the most widely reprinted spiritual writers in the United States during the nineteenth century. See Ann Taves, “‘External’ Devotions and the Interior Life: Popular Devotional Theologies in Mid-Nineteenth Century America,” Working Paper Series 13:2 (Spring 1983), University of Notre Dame, p. 12; id., *The Household of Faith: Roman Catholic Devotions in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986). The choice of *The Imitation of Christ* for spiritual reading among Benedictine women of this period reflected the prevailing spirituality of the time, that of focusing on the life and passion of Jesus in order to emphasize Jesus as a model of virtue to be imitated, or as a lover of human-kind inviting love in return. Taves, “External Devotions,” p. 54. Another

330 Constitution, pp. 16.

331 Ibid., chapter XII, "Confession and Communion," pp. 15–16.

332 Ibid., chapter XVIII, "Examination of Conscience," p. 16.


334 Ibid., chapter XV, "Renewal of Vows," p. 17.


337 Ibid., p. 18.

338 Chapter XX, p. 20.

339 McDonald, p. 203.


Conclusion

Throughout this study there have been periodic allusions to past and present critics who cite Americanization as the cause of Benedictine women's loss of monastic identity during the early decades of their history in America. In response to these voices and the issue of Benedictine women's identity, this book has argued that the cultural and religious climate of nineteenth-century America formed the arena in which Benedictine women of the Bavarian tradition reshaped the essential elements of their way of life into a unique expression of life according to the Rule of Benedict. The monastic rhythm of prayer, work and communal interaction which had always been the hallmark of their time-honored European tradition, characterized their early life in America as well. At the same time, the process of transplanting the European Benedictine tradition necessitated some fundamental and uniquely American innovations which became the legacy of pioneer Benedictine women to succeeding generations of women following the Rule of Benedict in America.

These concluding reflections about the lived experience of American Benedictine women from 1852 to 1881 are meant to be provocative rather than definitive. They are provocative insofar as they form a backdrop for the contemporary dialogue occurring among Benedictine women and men today. The interpretative question that has guided the research task of this study is also the
critical question behind the challenge of Benedictine renewal today: What are the essentials of the Benedictine tradition and to what extent do they determine the parameters of adaptation?

Owen Chadwick, in *Western Asceticism*, articulates an important caution for anyone engaged in the interpretation of religious history. The complex interaction between doctrine and practice in Christian history prevents the precise determination of “how far doctrine created [a] new way of life and how the new way of life exacted a certain development in doctrine to account for it.” He says, for instance, that “to explain the physical ease with which the ascetic changed into a monk does not explain the religious ideas which the new way of life demanded.” Chadwick’s insight is readily applicable to the two levels at which this study has progressed. At one level, there has been an attempt to explain how the enclosed, contemplative, Benedictine nun of the European tradition evolved into the active, contemplative, Benedictine sister in America. At another level, this study has explored the relationship between the essential teachings of the *Rule of Benedict* and the adaptation of these religious ideals in radically new circumstances.

Although the cause-effect interplay between the doctrine of the *Rule* and its practice in the European and American contexts cannot be precisely assessed, there is enough evidence to support three fundamental assertions: 1) A new set of post-secularization circumstances at St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt occasioned Bishop Karl August von Reisach’s interpretation of the *Rule of Benedict* in a constitution that validated the external work of teaching as a means of self-support. 2) The motivation behind the assignment of Benedicta Riepp and her companions to America was not to gain another means of self-support but rather to promote religious ideals through teaching—to nurture Catholicism among German immigrants and to spread the Benedictine Order in the New World. 3) The promotion of these religious ideals in the cultural and religious context of nineteenth-century America demanded profound changes in the practice of the *Rule,* the result of which was an American articulation of how the *Rule of Benedict* was being lived by women of the Bavarian Benedictine tradition in North America from 1852-1881. These assertions form the foundation upon which the thesis and the above-stated general conclusion of this book rest.
Conclusion

From among the many insights yielded by the analytical content of the previous chapter, five discoveries are worthy of highlighting as conclusions in themselves. These particular findings illustrate the dynamic interplay between fidelity to the essential values of the Benedictine tradition and innovative adaptation to American circumstances.

**Centrality of the Rule of Benedict**

During the foundation and expansion periods of Benedictine women in America, the *Rule of Benedict* remained the central rule and guide for a way of life that externally bore little resemblance to the life style at St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt, Bavaria. Between the years 1852 and 1881 Benedictine women in America had virtually no other guide by which to shape their lives. At the same time that they looked to the Eichstätt *Konstitutionen* of 1846 as a guide that merited their fidelity, it simply did not fit the realities of the primal wilderness of St. Marys, PA, or the “wild West” of St. Cloud, or the Civil War-torn region of Richmond, VA, or the southern culture of New Orleans, LA. It would take nearly thirty years before a new constitution could be drafted for women following the *Rule of Benedict* in America that would reflect the changes necessitated by a frontier on the move.

One prescription of the Eichstätt statutes, however, worked anywhere and under any circumstances. Reading the *Rule* daily after Prime remained normative in the 1880 *Constitution* as it had been the practice at St. Walburg’s in Eichstätt. Moreover, the centrality of the *Rule of Benedict* in their adapted way of life was strongly affirmed in the introduction to that *Constitution* in a statement that explicitated the interplay between tradition and change: “The purpose of this constitution is... to define more clearly such customs and observances as are according to the purpose of the Holy Rule, and the circumstances of the country.”

6
Retention of Monastic Vow Formula

American Benedictine women, in practice, reclaimed the traditional monastic vow formula of stability, conversion and obedience. In spite of the fact that the Konstitutionen of 1846 had specified the simple vow formula of poverty, chastity and obedience, and that the Roman Decree of 1859 had theoretically taken away their heritage of solemn vowing, Benedictine women in Eichstätt and America retained their profession of the monastic vows. Vow documents handwritten by the women themselves, between the years 1846 and 1881, indicate that their solution in response to church decrees was not to drop the monastic triad, but rather to add poverty and chastity to it. The American Constitution of 1880 validated this practice in the opening sentence of chapter nine: “The vows for the daughters of St. Benedict are five: Stability, Poverty, Chastity, Obedience and Conversion of Morals.”

Furthermore, one particular dimension of vowed life for Benedictine women underwent a redefinition within American circumstances. The Konstitutionen of 1846 had omitted the use of the word “stability” itself, and treated the reality of that commitment only within the context of its discussion of enclosure. In Eichstätt, strict enclosure, convent walls, and visible separation from the world defined stability for Benedictine women. In America, pioneer Benedictines could claim no private spaces, had no convent walls, and were visibly engaged in the world of their Bavarian immigrant brothers and sisters. Many of them experienced uprooting, scattering and a mobility previously unimaginable to them. In time, therefore, their meaning of stability came to be associated with attachment to the particular community of their profession. Because their “enclosure” embodied the realities of “forming a religious community and leading a community life,” their commitment to stability became personal and communal rather than physical.
Cenobitic Living in Branch Houses

Benedictine women in America between 1852 and 1881 not only retained the cenobitic value of living in community, but also discovered a new way of living it out in radically changed circumstances. They founded “daughterhouses” and created an entirely new concept, women living a community life modeled upon that of the motherhouse in places called “branch houses,” or “dependent houses,” or “missions.” Exactly what it was like to transplant an ancient, tried mode of life from the historic, ornate environs of St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt to a little four-room shack in the wilderness clearing of St. Marys, PA, is beyond contemporary imagination. An eyewitness account of how the space of that first house was arranged to reflect the communal values of prayer, work, hospitality, the common table, and study, illustrate how Benedictine women immediately saw beyond their destitute circumstances into the heart of the matter. The same task of physically arranging their poverty-stricken places to facilitate the values of communal life was repeated over and over again for decades, in an almost paradigmatic interplay of tradition and adaptation.

Work as a Mission of Service

Benedictine women of the foundation and expansion periods of their history in America allowed the meaning of work to evolve from a mere means of self-support into a ministry of service rendered to the needy, the poor, and the marginal. In Eichstätt, the work of teaching began as a condition upon which the convent could be reopened and be self-supporting after the period of secularization. In America, the income received from teaching never managed to support women religious even well into the twentieth century. Rather, teaching as a primary work became a way of furthering and fostering “Christian religious education,” a phrase used by Benedicta Riepp in her early extant correspondence. The “mission to America,” as Bishop Karl August von Reisach referred to it in the Konstitutionen of 1846, was precisely that, a call
to be actively engaged in the creation of a strong German im­mi­grant Church in mid-nineteenth-century Protestant America. 

Fidelity to Daily Common Prayer

Pioneer Benedictine women in America held firmly to the tradi­tion of daily common prayer based on the psalmody and reading of Scripture. It grieved them greatly when the Divine Office gave way to the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the 1860's. Nonetheless, they continued to pray together daily, “morning, noon and evening,” whether it was the Marian Office prayed by the choir sisters or the fifteen decades of the rosary by the lay sisters. They had brought their chant melodies and their office books with them from Eichstätt and when the time was right they began with energy and persistence to recover their heritage of monastic prayer, as early as the 1880’s in at least one community. House by house, each with its own particular obstacles to overcome, the process of retrieval was sustained well into the twentieth century. The Constitution of 1880 had prescribed the Cursus Marianus for weekdays, but by 1901 when a new draft of the Constitution was printed and submitted to Rome, the “sisters and the novices of the motherhouse” were urged to “daily recite the Divine Office in choir according to the Monastic Breviary for Benedictines.”

Epilogue

The voice of Sirach wisely proclaims that “though we speak much we cannot reach the end, and the sum of our words is: God is all in all! . . . Many things greater than these lie hidden, for we have seen but a little of God’s works” (43:27–32). Indeed, “we have seen but a little of God’s work” in the pages of this study, for many pieces of the story of Benedictine women in America from 1852–1881 still lie hidden and may never be uncovered. Perhaps, in the end, there is only one thing that can be said unequivocally about the women of this period. They were women of unbounded
Conclusion

strength of character and spiritual stamina. They witnessed these qualities 1) in their ability to listen to the call of the unknown and to the most basic and human needs of the People of God, 2) in their spirit of sacrifice in letting go of homeland, family, financial security, while holding fast to a cherished way of life, 3) in their ability to take risks and to dare to follow uncharted calls, 4) in their courage to stand tall while struggling for what was rightfully theirs within male-dominated institutions and processes, 5) in their ability to place a vision and way of life above canonical clarity and sanction, 6) in their humaneness in adapting a structured and sometimes rigid European pattern of Benedictine life to a primitive and often uncultured American frontier. Finally, it was a “love stern as death” that both motivated and sustained them in their Benedictine response to God’s call.

As the current generation of Benedictine women, inspired by the story of their foremothers told in these pages, presses toward the 150th anniversary of their tradition in America in the year 2002, the task of reflecting upon and interpreting the historical data will become increasingly urgent. The work of post-Vatican II reform, renewal, and reidentification seems only to be in its infancy. Thus, the essential task of reshaping an ancient tradition once again, into a form appropriate within the religious and cultural context of a new century and a new millenium, still lies ahead.

Notes


More appropriately for our discussion, “the complex interaction between essentials of the tradition and parameters of adaptation.”


See Marie Augusta Neal, From Nuns to Sisters (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publication, 1990), pp. 9–38, for a sociological view of the transformation of North American religious women from “nuns” to “sisters.” In these pages Neal traces the roots of this shift from early Christian times to the present.


Conclusion

10 See chapter V, n. 208.


Appendix 1

Periods in the Life Cycle of a Religious Community*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foundation</th>
<th>Expansion</th>
<th>Stabilization</th>
<th>Breakdown</th>
<th>Critical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reidentification</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Periods in American Benedictine Women's History

|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|--------|

Appendix 2

Chronological Inventory of Relevant Correspondence: 1831–1900

Key To Locations

G = Eng. trans. in Girgen, *Behind the Beginnings*
M = Eng. trans. in Morkin and Seigel, *Wind in the Wheat*
B = Eng. trans. in Barry, *Worship and Work*
SBCA = Original and Eng. trans. in St. Benedict’s Convent Archives, St. Joseph, MN
UNDA/SBCA = St. Benedict’s Convent Archives copy from University of Notre Dame Archives
MSBMA = Original and Eng. trans. in Mount St. Benedict Monastery Archives, Erie, PA

1831 Aug. 24 King Ludwig I of Bavaria to Edward von Schenk, Cabinet Minister of Bavaria . G
1835 June 7 Decree of Ludwig ......................... G
1845 Nov. 8 Boniface Wimmer, O.S.B., *Postzeitung* .... B
1847 Dec. 28 Wimmer to Friends in Munich ........... G,M
1849 Aug. 30 Ludwig to Wimmer ...................... G
1852 Feb. 13 Wimmer to Ludwig ....................... G
Apr. 5 Wimmer to Karl August von Reisach, Bishop of Eichstätt ................. G
May 29 Edwarda Schnitzer, O.S.B., Prioress of St. Walburg Convent, Eichstätt, to the Ludwig-Missionsverein ............... G,M
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 15</td>
<td>Michael O’Connor, Bishop of Erie, to Wimmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug. 9</td>
<td>Wimmer to Annalen der Verbreitung des Glaubens, Publication of the Ludwig-Missionsverein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 8</td>
<td>Wimmer to Rupert Leiss, O.S.B., Abbot of Scheyern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 17</td>
<td>Wimmer to Gregor Scherr, O.S.B., Abbot of Metten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 19</td>
<td>Wimmer to Abbot of Schottenstift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 19</td>
<td>Ludwig to Benedicta Riepp, O.S.B., American Foundress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 27</td>
<td>Riepp to von Reisach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1853</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 8</td>
<td>Riepp to Ludwig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 4</td>
<td>Wimmer to Ludwig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 6</td>
<td>Wimmer to Scherr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 28</td>
<td>Schnitzer to Ludwig-Missionsverein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 29</td>
<td>Georg von Oettl, Bishop of Eichstatt, to Ludwig-Missionsverein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 15</td>
<td>Riepp to Ludwig-Missionsverein</td>
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<tr>
<td>1854</td>
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<td>Aug. 7</td>
<td>Wimmer to von Reisach</td>
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<td>1855</td>
<td>Riepp to von Reisach</td>
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<td>Jan. 7</td>
<td>Riepp to von Reisach</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb. 19</td>
<td>Wimmer to Ludwig</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mar. 2</td>
<td>Schnitzer to Ludwig-Missionsverein</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mar. 15</td>
<td>Riepp to Ignatius Garner, Pennsylvania Land Agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 20</td>
<td>Riepp to von Reisach</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 21</td>
<td>Riepp to Ludwig-Missionsverein</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug. 1</td>
<td>Wimmer to Cardinal Barnabo of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith</td>
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<td>Aug. 8</td>
<td>Propaganda Fide, Rome, to von Oettl</td>
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<td>Aug. 8</td>
<td>Prop. Fide to Joshua Marie, Young, Bishop of Erie</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oct. 1</td>
<td>Young to Barnabo</td>
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<td>Oct. 6</td>
<td>von Oettl to Young</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov. 21</td>
<td>Wimmer to Demetrius di Marogna, O.S.B., Prior of St. Cloud, MN</td>
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<tr>
<td>1856</td>
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<td>Feb. 14</td>
<td>Riepp to Ludwig-Missionsverein</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 30</td>
<td>Wimmer to Ludwig</td>
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<td>Date</td>
<td>To/From</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug. 25</td>
<td>Riepp to Garner</td>
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<tr>
<td>1857</td>
<td>Mar. 10</td>
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<td>Apr. 13</td>
<td>Riepp to Ludwig-Missionsverein</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apr. 24</td>
<td>Rupert Seidenbusch, O.S.B., Prior of St. Marys, PA, to Wimmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 3</td>
<td>Riepp to Wimmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 22</td>
<td>Seidenbusch to Wimmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 15</td>
<td>di Marogna to Wimmer</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 25</td>
<td>Young to Whom It May Concern</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 4</td>
<td>Young to Wimmer</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 14</td>
<td>di Marogna to Wimmer</td>
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<td>July 24</td>
<td>Wimmer to Joseph Ferdinand Mueller, Court Chaplain to King Ludwig I</td>
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<td>Aug. 10</td>
<td>Wimmer to Ludwig</td>
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<td>Aug. 12</td>
<td>di Marogna to Wimmer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug. 12</td>
<td>Alexius Roetzer, O.S.B., Monk of St. Cloud, MN, to Wimmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug. ?</td>
<td>Willibalda Scherbauer, O.S.B., Prioress at St. Cloud, to Wimmer</td>
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<td>Aug. 19</td>
<td>Scherbauer to Wimmer</td>
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<td>Aug. 20</td>
<td>di Marogna to Wimmer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug. 22</td>
<td>Evangelista Kremmeter, O.S.B., Nun at St. Cloud, to Wimmer</td>
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<td>Aug. 27</td>
<td>Scherbauer to Wimmer</td>
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<td>n.d.</td>
<td>von Oetl to Mueller</td>
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<td>Aug. 31</td>
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<td>Sept. 18</td>
<td>Wimmer to Baron Rudolph von Oberkamp, Business Manager of the Ludwig-Missionsverein</td>
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<td>Mueller to Wimmer</td>
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<td>Wimmer to Oberkamp</td>
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<td>Mar. 17</td>
<td>Prop. Fide to Wimmer</td>
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<td>Mar. 26</td>
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1889 June 11 Schnitzer to Scherbauer ............. SBCA
1893 Feb. 10 Schnitzer to Scherbauer ............. SBCA
1898 Feb. 10 Schnitzer to Scherbauer ............. SBCA
Mar. ? Scherbauer to Schnitzer ................... G
Apr. ? Schnitzer to Scherbauer ............. SBCA
1899 Nov. 22 Schnitzer to Scherbauer ............. SBCA
1900 Oct. 3 Schnitzer to Scherbauer ............. SBCA
Appendix 3

Roman Decree of 1859*

Illustrious and Reverend Brother:

The priest, Boniface Wimmer, Abbot of the American Benedictine Congregation, has humbly explained to our Holy Lord, Pope Pius IX, that three convents of sisters of this same Order have been erected by him in the cities of Erie, Newark, and Marystown, which are especially in need of a Christian institution for girls. And he has urgently requested that they be approved by Apostolic authority, and after having been raised to the status of priories, that they be subject to the congregation. His Holiness, having weighed the whole proposal diligently and carefully, thinks that he should not by any means consent to the aforesaid petitions, but wishing to attend these same convents with some favors, he has especially commended their institution [founding], granting to the ordinaries of the places in whose dioceses they are found, the faculty of approving them with profession of simple vows and under the jurisdiction of the bishops of the same places who by a special apostolic concession will be able to use the abbot spokesman as a founder to choose their rule [way of life] and even to depute as confessors monks of the aforesaid congregation, provided there are not opposing obstacles.

Rome, December 6, 1859

G. Card. della Genga

Appendix 4

The Women Who Planted the Tradition in North America: 1852–1855

I. First Group from Eichstätt, Bavaria (July 22, 1852)
   Benedicta (Sybilla) Riepp
   b. born June 28, 1825, Waal, Bavaria
   p. professed July 9, 1846, Eichstätt (choir)
   d. died March 15, 1862, St. Cloud, MN
   l. left convent
   Walburga (Wilhelmina) Dietrich
   b. not extant May 20, 1804, Memmingen, Bavaria
   p. April 12, 1841, Eichstätt (choir)
   d. April 27, 1877, St. Marys, PA
   Maura (Maria) Flieger
   b. not extant November 29, 1822, Heiligkreuz, Württemburg
   p. July 9, 1848, Eichstätt (lay)
   d. November 2, 1865, Erie, PA

II. First Investiture of Novices (October 16, 1853)
   Benedicta (Susanna) Burkhard
   b. born March 19, 1831, Niedertraubling, Bavaria
   p. professed December 30, 1854, St. Marys, PA (choir)
   d. died March 4, 1901, Ridgely, MD
   Josepha (Elizabeth) Buerkle
   b. born October 3, 1838, Pittsburgh, PA
   p. professed December 30, 1854, St. Marys, PA
   l. left convent August 3, 1859, from Covington, KY
   Adelgunda Leschall
   b. not extant
   p. professed December 30, 1854, St. Marys, PA
   l. 1859, from Newark
Gertrude (Julia) Kapser  
  b. December 18, 1837, Gars, Bavaria  
  p. December 30, 1854, St. Marys, PA (choir)  
  d. September 18, 1918, Atchison, KS  

Mechtild (Catherine) Richter  
  b. November 11, 1834, Loretta, PA  
  p. December 30, 1854, St. Marys, PA (lay)  
  d. December 17, 1912, St. Cloud, MN  

Mechtild (Catherine) Richter  
  b. November 11, 1834, Loretta, PA  
  p. December 30, 1854, St. Marys, PA (lay)  
  d. December 17, 1912, St. Cloud, MN  

Gregoria (Magdalene) Moser  
  b. July 6, 1836, New York City  
  p. December 30, 1854, St. Marys, PA (choir)  
  d. February 4, 1923, Atchison, KS  

Placida (Catherine) Graber  
  b. May 28, 1835, Carrolltown, PA  
  p. December 30, 1854, St. Marys, PA (lay)  
  d. November 14, 1905, St. Marys, PA  

Boniface (Mary) Cassidy  
  b. January 22, 1839, Blairsville, PA  
  p. December 30, 1854, St. Marys, PA (choir)  
  d. November 19, 1885, St. Marys, PA  

Edwarda Redant  
  b. date n.e., 1832, Brussels, Belgium  
  p. December 30, 1854, St. Marys, PA  
  d. June 29, 1859, St. Marys, PA  

Luitgarde Butsch  
  b. August 24, 1839, Tann, Bavaria  
  p. December 30, 1854, St. Marys, PA  
  d. August 30, 1857, St. Marys, PA  

Bernarda Weidenboerner  
  b. June 23, 1840, Philadelphia, PA  
  p. December 30, 1854, St. Marys, PA  
  d. September 10, 1857, St. Marys, PA  

Hildegarde Renner  
  b. n.e.  
  l. 1854, from St. Marys, PA  

III. Second Group from Eichstätt (January 13, 1854)  
    Scholastica (Justina) Burkhard  
    b. September 17, 1832, Untermassing, Bavaria  
    p. September 22, 1853, Eichstätt (choir)  
    d. April 24, 1881, Erie, PA
Appendix 4

Alexia (Maria Anna) Lechner
b. August 16, 1827, Mögesheim, Bavaria
p. March 19, 1853, Eichstätt (lay)
d. December 14, 1891, Covington, KY

Lidwina (Theresia) Uhl
b. May 12, 1831, Hausen, Bavaria
p. November 21, 1853, Eichstätt (lay)
d. June 26, 1859, St. Marys, PA

Willibalda (Barbara) Koegel (candidate)
b. date n.e., 1828, Eichstätt, Bavaria
p. June 29, 1855 (deathbed), St. Marys, PA
d. June 29, 1855, St. Marys, PA

Xavier (Ottilia) Lechner (candidate)
b. October 11, 1825, Mögesheim, Bavaria
p. March 21, 1857, St. Marys, PA (lay) (final)
d. September 30, 1905, St. Marys, PA

Stanislaus Kostka (Crescence) Beyerle (candidate)
b. May 11, 1826, Mögesheim, Bavaria
p. March 21, 1857, St. Marys, PA (lay) (final)
d. February 6, 1888, St. Marys, PA

IV. Second Investiture of Novices (February 10, 1854)

Augustine (Mary Jane) Short
b. March 31, 1834, Blairsville, PA
p. February 10, 1855, St. Marys (choir)
d. April 20, 1902, Covington, KY

Ruperta (Mary) Albert
b. December 18, 1836, Frederick, MD
p. February 10, 1855, St. Marys, PA (lay)
d. September 1, 1926, Erie, PA

Adelberta Glatt
b. April 20, 1839, town n.e., Bavaria
p. February 10, 1858, St. Marys, PA (lay)
d. April 16, 1866, Chicago, IL

Cunigunda Lebus
b. date n.e., 1835, town n.e., Ohio
p. February 10, 1855, St. Marys, PA
d. May 22, 1856, St. Marys, PA
V. Third Investiture of Novices (October 15, 1854)

Alphonse (Margaret) Hussey
- b. February 2, 1814, Dublin, Ireland
- p. October 17, 1857, Newark, NJ (choir) (final)
- d. December 31, 1886, Newark, NJ

Theresa (Margaret) Vogel
- b. July 10, 1834, Klueckheim, Bavaria
- p. March 21, 1857, St. Marys, PA (choir) (final)
- d. May 20, 1886, St. Marys, PA

Salesia Haas
- b. November 25, 1827, town n.e., Bavaria
- p. January 21, 1858, Erie, PA (?) (lay) (final)
- d. March 6, 1880, New Orleans, LA

Adelaide Silber
- b. date n.e., 1841, Pittsburgh, PA
- p. January 6, 1858 (deathbed), St. Marys, PA
- d. January 14, 1858, St. Marys, PA

Kilian [Eger]
- data n.e.

VI. Fourth Investiture of Novices (February 10, 1855)

Evangelista (Mary Ann) Kremmeter
- b. February 2, 1833, Ulm, Wurttemburg
- p. March 21, 1857, St. Marys, PA (choir) (final)
- d. June 21, 1909, Atchison, KS

Nepomucene (Mary Teresa) Ludwig
- b. March 14, 1835, Ulm, Wurttemburg
- p. March 21, 1857, St. Marys, PA (choir) (final)
- d. July 21, 1921, St. Marys, PA

Baptista (Mary) Mayer
- b. date n.e., 1829, Ulm Wurttemburg
- p. December 2, 1856 (deathbed), St. Marys, PA
- d. December 8, 1856, St. Marys, PA

Romana (Cordula) Bernhard
- b. date n.e., 1825, Grundstadt, Alsace
- p. March 21, 1857, St. Marys (lay) (final)
- d. August 2, 1895, Allegheney, PA

Meinrada Massenhauser
- b. March 6, 1828, Oberzanhausen, Bavaria
- p. January 6, 1859, Newark, NJ (lay)
- d. February 25, 1885, Newark, NJ
VII. Third Group from Eichstätt (December 16, 1855)

Willibalda (Franziska) Scherbauer
b. November 8, 1828, Kastl, Bavaria
p. November 13, 1851, Eichstätt (choir)
d. February 12, 1914, St. Joseph, MN

Emmerana (Josefa) Bader
b. December 29, 1829, Freising, Bavaria
p. November 1, 1852, Eichstätt (lay)
d. July 17, 1902, Chiemsee, Bavaria

Philomena (Karolina) Spiegel
b. March 30, 1833, Eichstätt, Bavaria
p. December 8, 1854, Eichstätt (lay)
d. February 4, 1884, Newark, NJ

Frances (Aloysia) Knapp (candidate)
b. August 25, 1829, Schweden, Württemburg
p. January 19, 1858, Erie, PA
d. February 7, 1910, Covington, KY

Anselma (Katharina) Schoenhofer (candidate)
b. November 10, 1830, Eichstätt, Bavaria
p. January 19, 1858, Erie, PA
d. July 12, 1863, Covington, KY
### Membership of St. Benedict's Convent, Erie, PA
At time of Roman Decree, December 6, 1859

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+ Founding members.
### Membership of St. Walburg Convent, Covington, KY
At time of Roman Decree, December 6, 1859

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<td>3. Ruperta Albert</td>
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(St. Walburg Convent received its first candidate on March 16, 1860: Helen Saelinger)

* Founding members.
EICHSTÄTT, BAVARIA

+ St. Marys, Pennsylvania 1852
  + Erie, Pennsylvania 1856
    + Covington, Kentucky 1859
      + Chicago, Illinois 1861
        + Nauvoo, Illinois 1874
          * Covington, Louisiana 1902
            * Fort Smith, Arkansas 1925
              * Columbia, Missouri 1969
                + Beech Grove, Indiana 1961
                  + Belcourt, North Dakota 1963
                    + Sunnymead, California 1972

KEY:
+ New Foundations
* Moved to New Location

ERIE'S ROOTS AND SUBSEQUENT GROWTH
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<td>+ 1. Philomena Speigel</td>
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<td>+ 2. Benedicta Burkhard</td>
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<td>Latrobe, PA</td>
<td>Newark, NJ</td>
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<td>1835</td>
<td>Nov. 13, 1857</td>
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<td>+ 5. Meinrada Massenhauser</td>
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<td>6. Scholastica Mack</td>
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<td>7. Gertrude Pfaller</td>
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<td>Feb. 10, 1859</td>
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<td><strong>Temporary Resident</strong></td>
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<td>Mar. 14, 1835</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mar. 21, 1857</td>
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* Founding members.
EICHSTÄTT, BAVARIA

St. Marys, Pennsylvania 1852

→ Newark, New Jersey 1857

+ Wilmington, Delaware 1874

+ Elizabeth, New Jersey 1868

= Ridgely, Maryland 1887

+ Severn, Maryland 1974

= Baltimore, Maryland 1981

KEY:

+ New Foundations
* Moved to New Location
R Reaffiliated

NEWARK/RIDGELY'S ROOTS AND SUBSEQUENT GROWTH
**Membership of St. Joseph Convent, St. Cloud, MN**

At time of Roman Decree, December 6, 1859

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Birth Place/Date</th>
<th>Investiture</th>
<th>Profession</th>
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<td>Eichstätt</td>
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<td>Jun. 28, 1825</td>
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<td>Jul. 9, 1849</td>
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<td>Nov. 18, 1828</td>
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<td>*4. Gregoria Moser</td>
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<td>Oct. 16, 1853</td>
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<td>Dec. 18, 1837</td>
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<td>*6. Amanda Meier</td>
<td>Baden</td>
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<td>Nov. 2, 1837</td>
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<td>*7. Ehrentrude Meier</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>St. Cloud, MN</td>
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<td>1839</td>
<td>Oct. 21, 1860</td>
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<td>8. Antonia Streitz</td>
<td>Prussia</td>
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<td>Nov. 5, 1833</td>
<td>Sep. 29, 1859</td>
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<td>9. Boniface Bantle</td>
<td>Bavaria</td>
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<td>Jun. 10, 1839</td>
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<td>10. Bernarda Auge</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>St. Cloud, MN</td>
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<td></td>
<td>March 1840</td>
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</table>

* Founding members.
EICHSTÄTT, BAVARIA

- St. Marys, Pennsylvania 1852
- St. Cloud, Minnesota 1857

* St. Joseph, Minnesota 1865

+ Atchison, Kansas 1865
  + Duluth, Minnesota 1892
  + Winnipeg, Canada 1912
  + Crookston, Minnesota 1919
    + Bismarck, North Dakota 1947
    + St. Paul, Minnesota 1948
      + Eau Claire, Wisconsin 1948
  + Colorado Springs, Colorado 1965

+ Mexico City, Mexico 1950
  + Glendora, California 1956

+ Olympian, Washington 1952

+ Sapporo, Japan 1985
  + Tanshui, Taiwan 1988

ST. CLOUD/ST. JOSEPH'S ROOTS and SUBSEQUENT GROWTH
## Membership of St. Joseph Convent, St. Marys, PA

At time of Roman Decree, December 6, 1859

### Perpetually Professed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Birth Place/Date</th>
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<th>Profession</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Placida Graber</td>
<td>Carrolltown, PA, May 28, 1835</td>
<td>St. Marys, PA, Oct. 16, 1853</td>
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<td>3. Theresa Vogel</td>
<td>Bavaria, Jul. 10, 1834</td>
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<td>4. Stanislaus Kostka Beyerle</td>
<td>Bavaria, May 11, 1826</td>
<td>St. Marys, PA, May 24, 1855</td>
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<td>5. Xavier Lechner</td>
<td>Bavaria, Oct. 11, 1825</td>
<td>St. Marys, PA, May 24, 1855</td>
<td>St. Marys, PA, Mar. 21, 1857</td>
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<td>6. Romana Bernhard</td>
<td>Alsace, 1825</td>
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<td>St. Marys, PA, Mar. 21, 1857</td>
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<td>8. Mechtild Richter</td>
<td>Loretta, PA, Nov. 11, 1834</td>
<td>St. Marys, PA, Oct. 16, 1853</td>
<td>St. Marys, PA, Feb. 10, 1858</td>
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### Simply Professed

<table>
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<th>Birth Place/Date</th>
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<th>Profession</th>
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<td>14. Rose Bastard</td>
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<td>15. Itha</td>
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<td>16. Ida Weigel</td>
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<td>St. Marys, PA Nov. 13, 1859</td>
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<td><strong>Novices</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td>17. Hyacintha Halter</td>
<td>Canton, OH Feb. 26, 1830</td>
<td>St. Marys, PA Mar. 21, 1859</td>
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<td>18. Beatrice Blakely</td>
<td>Pittsburgh, PA</td>
<td>St. Marys, PA Mar. 21, 1859</td>
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* Founding members.
ST. MARYS ROOTS and SUBSEQUENT GROWTH
Appendix 14

Konstitutionen
1846

Chapter
1. Obedience
2. Poverty
3. Chastity
4. Divine Service, Spiritual Exercises
5. Sisterly Love
6. Silence, Speaking, Letters
7. About the Workroom
8. Cells and Dormitory
9. Clothing
10. Portress
11. About the Parlor
12. Enclosure
13. Scrutinium: Postulants and Novices
14. The Voting Process
15. About the Reception of Candidates
16. The Reception and Instruction of Novices
17. About the Novitiate
18. Pronouncing Vows
19. Notes for the Examiner and the Examinee
20. Chapter of Faults
21. Lighter Faults
22. More Weighty Faults
23. Greater Faults
24. Penances for Lighter Faults
25. Penances for More Weighty Faults
26. Penances for Greater Faults
27. Procedure for Chapter Faults
28. Sister in Charge of the Wardrobe
29. On the Seamstress
30. About the Refectory
31. About the Kitchen

Constitution of St. Scholastica
1880

Chapter
1. Government
2. On the Prioress: Her Rights and Duties
3. On the Chapter: Its Rights and Duties
4. Rank and Duties of Officers
5. Qualities of Candidates for Prioress
6. Preparation for an Election
7. Election of the Prioress
8. On the Novitiate
9. On the Vows
10. On the Scholasticate
11. Divine Office
12. Confession and Communion
13. Mass, Vespers and Benediction
14. Retreats
15. Renewal of Vows
16. Lenten Observance
17. Meditation and Spiritual Reading
18. Examinations of Conscience
19. Culpa Chapter
20. On Special Private Devotions
21. On Recreation
22. On Meat and Drink
23. On Fasting and Abstinence
24. On the Enclosure
25. Uniformity in Dress
26. Real Estate
27. Branch Houses
28. Congregation of St. Scholastica
29. On the General Officers of the Congregation
30. On the Prioress General and Assistants General
31. On the Ordinary and Extra-ordinary Visits
32. On the General Chapter
33. Matters Subject to the Decisions of the General Chapter
Appendix 15

Karl August, Bishop of Eichstätt
by God’s mercy and the grace of the Apostolic See
to the respected convent of the Benedictines
of St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt*

At the visitation of your convent undertaken last year, we came to
the conclusion and informed you that you are in need of a special
constitution for your community. This should give you specific
regulations concerning the conventual order.

Therefore, we immediately began drawing up the same. Upon careful examination of your Holy Rule, we noticed that it
was originally written for different circumstances, and not for
women, but men. To adapt this to the present circumstances,
there is a need for clearer interpretations and more specific regu­
lations. This ought to be done in such a way that on the one hand,
the Holy Rule will be perfectly followed, and on the other hand,
that all which concerns the present call of the community as a
teaching institute (Lehrinstitut), for which nothing is regulated in
the Holy Rule, would be specifically laid down.

Therefore, in writing new statutes for your community, it is
in no way our intent to depart from your Holy Rule or to change
the essential prescriptions. However, we found it necessary to
make use of the faculty we received from the Holy See by decree
of April 2, 1841, and to introduce those changes which are called
for in the present circumstances. The character of the Holy Rule
shall be preserved and only those regulations which are lacking
shall be added. One or the other may be expanded for better un­
derstanding of the present situation, and at the same time will be
written more precisely and positively, so that the rules and cus­
toms which have been arranged by the superiors, to guarantee an
orderly conventual life, may be better observed.

* Preface to Konstitutionen, 1846. Handwritten German copy, SSPA. Eng. trans.
by Fidelis Hackert, O.S.B., in collaboration with Ephrem Hollermann, O.S.B.
Therefore, it is our definite intention that the Holy Rule be kept in its entire form and observed perfectly. At the same time, we must insist with the same decisiveness, that the statutes framed by us for the Convent of St. Walburg be most exactly observed by the members of the same. The conventual order introduced through these must be carried out in such a manner that the explanations and practices of the Holy Rule contained therein will not be weakened or destroyed, either through a defective custom proceeding solely from appealing to the Holy Rule, or through ignorance, misunderstanding or lack of self-denial, to the disadvantage of the individual as well as the scandal given to the community.

It is not our intention that the observance of these statutes should bind you under sin, except if there is a transgression of the commandments of God or those of the Church, or if there is a violation of the vows. Each of you should be convinced that through the observance of these statutes, temporal and eternal benefits will be assured.

You know, my beloved daughters, that all who have been called by God to the religious life, to take up the yoke of the Divine Savior, Jesus Christ, are bound to strive for Christian perfection, namely that perfection which is characteristic of the religious life. Christian perfection is the goal for which all religious must strive if they desire to attain their salvation. But there are as many different ways that lead to that goal as there are different religious orders approved by the church. Although through all of them the same goal can be reached, nevertheless, not every way is suitable for every soul. Only the one to which God has called an individual is the right way for her. Any other one would only lead her astray and into ruin.

Now, the life to which God has called you is pointed out in your rules and statutes. Therefore, these alone are for you the road that leads to your goal. On this path alone, God will give you all those graces which will enable you to keep his commandments and counsels and to persevere. Consequently, as long as you observe your rules and regulations without delay, you can be certain that you are traveling the road that leads to God. Contrariwise, through every deviation from seemingly unimportant matters, and through every negligence of them, you may lose your way and perish.
Dearest daughters, in the same measure, therefore, that the salvation of your souls is dear to your hearts, so also should be the observance of your rules and statutes—not an observance of the mere letter but an observance in spirit and truth. Following the mere letter, even if that would be possible for a length of time, would not be of any benefit because it would not make you any better.

Not only should the rules and statutes regulate your external observance, but above all your interior attitudes. Do not flatter yourselves with an exact fulfillment of your duties, conduct, and behavior, nor with the execution of your charges in the community and with your prompt observance of the rules and statutes, unless you strive at the same time to acquire the spirit of the rules and regulations. That spirit is one of self-denial, of renunciation, and of detachment from all worldly things. It is a spirit of love, meekness and prayerfulness. If you observe your rules and statutes in this spirit, they will certainly lead you to your goal of perfection and to eternal salvation. You will become what you ought to be, true nuns, dead to the world and to yourselves, living only for Christ the Lord, as the beloved spouses of the Son of God, as chosen daughters of the heavenly Father and the special heirs of his Kingdom.

Certainly it will cost you some effort to observe the statutes promptly and conscientiously according to the letter as well as to the spirit. It can be very difficult for us to persevere in this prompt and conscientious observance until death. But remember, most beloved daughters, that the Kingdom will not belong to the idle, but to those who use force; that one cannot be a disciple of Jesus Christ unless daily the cross is taken up to follow him; that those who do not fight valiantly will not receive the crown. Remember what the saints did to gain eternal bliss. Remember especially your Holy Father St. Benedict and the multitude of saints who call themselves his children and who have given the Catholic Church such glory. Remember what admirable examples of a most perfect and conscientious observance of the Holy Rule they have set for you to imitate. This implies that St. Benedict in no way would identify you as his dear daughters if you would not strive with all your might to imitate these examples which have been presented to you.

Consider well that Christ, your God and bridegroom, has suffered to save you from eternal damnation and to obtain for you
The Reshaping of a Tradition

eternal salvation. You will share in his glory if you have also shared in his sufferings. Consider what invaluable blessings God has bestowed on you and how much, therefore, you are indebted to him. It is only proper to serve most perfectly such a great and kind Lord and to please him even in the smallest things.

Finally, consider that with the grace of God everything is possible and even easy if one is determined. "I can do anything in him who strengthens me." These graces of God, who has called you to this order and monastic life, are always available. God's holy will is, therefore, that you obey these rules and statutes. Consequently, you can also be certain that you will always receive those graces that will help you to observe without delay your rules and statutes. Besides, your life on earth will then also be blessed. If each one of you is living her life according to the rules and regulations, then you yourselves will see that peace, love, and joy will reign in your convent, and that there will not be a more delightful life than yours.

In order that these statutes remain fresh in your mind, we require that they be read aloud at table or at lectio divina on the first days of the month. With fatherly love, we advise each one of you to examine her conscience in regard to the observance of the rules and statutes, so that if any irregularity has crept in, it can be remedied immediately.

Trusting that in your virtue and zeal you will observe these helpful statutes, not out of fear but rather always out of love, we bestow upon you, with fatherly affection, our episcopal blessing.

Given in our episcopal residence, Eichstätt, on July 11, 1846.

Karl August, Bishop of Eichstätt
Appendix 16

Sampling of German Books Related to Benedictine Life Retained in Libraries and Archives of Early Convents

Benediktiner des Stifts Maria Einsiedeln. Die flammende Liebe zum heiligsten Altarssaakrament von Maria Eustella in ihrem Leben und ihren Schriften [The burning love for the blessed sacrament in the life and works of Maria Eustella]. Schaffhausen: F. Hurter'sche Buchhandlung, 1859.


Geist unseres heiligsten mit dem Geist aller Gerachten erfüllten Vaters und Patriarchen aller Mönchen Benedicti aus seiner heiligen Regel und Leben.
Betrachtungen für all Tage Fest und Zeiten des ganzen Jahrest [Spirituality of our most holy father and patriarch of monks, Benedict, filled with the spirit of the just, according to his Holy Rule and life. Meditation of every day, feast, and season of the year]. vom Lateinischen von einem Mitglied dieses heiligen Ordens. München: Johann Theodor Osten, 1760.


Reliquien aus dem Mittelalter Geistlich und Weltlich [Relics from the Middle Ages, spiritual and worldly].


Volkommene und nützliche Ausheilung und Application aller Puncten so aus der H. Regel S. Benedicti [Complete and practical compendium and application of all matters concerning the Rule of Benedict]. Nach Klösterlicher

Zell, Karl. Die heilige Lioba [St. Lioba]. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder 'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1873.

**Sampling of Other Religious Books**


Das Leben der heiligen Mutter Theresia von Jesus und die Gnaden welche Gott ihr erwiesen, geschrieben auf Geheiss ihres Beichtvaters [*The life of holy mother Therese of Jesus and the graces which God bestowed on her, written at the behest of her confessor*]. Zum ersten Male vollständig aus dem spanischen Originale übersetzt von Ludwig Clarus. Regensburg: Georg Joseph Manz, 1851.


Lechner, Peter, O.S.B. Beispiele christlicher Vollkommenheit und heroischer Tugend aus dem Leben der Heiligen [*Examples of Christian perfection, and heroic virtues in the lives of the saints*]. Regensburg: Georg Joseph Manz, 1873.


Schmidt, J. A. F. Reisen Jesu Christi nach dem französischen bearbeitet mit der Geschichte der Juden von Salomo bis zu ihrer gänzlicher Zerstreung [Journey of Jesus Christ (from the French) with the story of the Jews from Solomon until the complete dispersion]. Wien: Mechitaristen-Congregationsbuchhandlung, 1836.

Vierzehn festtägliche Reden [Fourteen talks for feastdays]. Von dem Verfasser der Predigten für das Landvolk so gut als sie die Bauern verstehen. Augsburg: Nicolaus Dolb, 1788.


Appendix 17

Statuten des Klosters St. Walburg

1854

Chapter
1. Obedience
2. Poverty
3. Chastity
4. Divine Service, Spiritual Exercises
5. Silence
6. Workroom
7. Cells and Dormitory
8. Refectory
9. Clothing
10. Sisterly Love
11. Enclosure
12. Parlor
13. Portresses
14. Daily Schedule

1876

Chapter
1. Obedience
2. Poverty
3. Chastity
4. Divine Service, Spiritual Exercises
5. Sisterly Love
6. Silence, Speaking, Letters
7. Clothing
8. Workroom
9. Cells and Dormitory
10. Refectory
11. Portresses
12. Parlor
13. Chapter of Faults
14. Minor, Important, and Grave Faults
15. Penances for Faults
16. Procedure for Chapter of Faults
17. Kitchen
18. Wardrobe
19. Seamstress
20. Pronouncing Vows
21. Voting
22. Enclosure
Bibliography

Archives

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Monastery Immaculate Conception, Ferdinand, Indiana
Mount St. Benedict Monastery, Erie, Pennsylvania
Mount St. Scholastica, Atchison, Kansas
St. Benedict's Convent, St. Joseph, Minnesota
St. Benedict Monastery, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
St. Gertrude Monastery, Ridgely, Maryland
St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota
St. Joseph Monastery, Tulsa, Oklahoma
St. Joseph Monastery, St. Marys, Pennsylvania
St. Mary Priory Archives, Nauvoo, Illinois
St. Scholastica Monastery, Fort Smith, Arkansas
St. Scholastica Priory, Chicago, Illinois
St. Vincent Archabbey, Latrobe, Pennsylvania
St. Walburg Abbey, Eichstätt, West Germany
St. Walburg Monastery, Covington, Kentucky
St. Walburga Monastery, Elizabeth, New Jersey
University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana
Unpublished Sources


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