

Our Lady of Peace and the Sound of Music -- 150 Years of Heritage

My 8-year-old great niece loves singing songs from the *Sound of Music*, as I did as a child. I tried to explain to Kayla that there is a connection between Maria's monastery and mine. That's something to acknowledge as we celebrate 150 years of Benedictine women in the United States.

First, we must go back to St. Walburg's Monastery in Eichstatt, Bavaria. St. Walburga was one of several Benedictines from England who went with Boniface to Germany in the 8th century. First buried at Heidenheim, where her monastery was, her bones were later taken to Eichstatt, where her brother, a bishop, was also buried. In 1035 Count Leodegar decided to found a monastery at the site of Walburga's tomb. Nuns from St. Erentrud's, Nonnberg (near Salzburg) joined local canonesses as the first members of this community -- and hence a connecting branch on the Benedictine family tree to Maria's monastery.

Like many monasteries, Eichstatt had its ups and downs. It was pillaged in the Thirty Years War, and nearly died out under the secularization laws in the early 1800's. The monastery at Eichstatt was more fortunate than others, in that the sisters were allowed to remain, but they could not admit new members. "Good" King Ludwig I allowed its revival in 1835. To prove its contribution to society and to support itself, the nuns opened a girls' school. (They were also given the option of selling St. Walburga's oil, or running a brewery!) In 1848 the community had 25 members.

Meanwhile male Benedictines had come to the United States in 1846, and in 1848 Abbot Boniface Wimmer went to Eichstatt to beg for sisters to teach the German immigrant children in Pennsylvania. The struggling sisters at Eichstatt responded; Benedicta Riepp and two other sisters arrived in the United States in July of 1852. Their first house at St. Mary's, Pennsylvania was a convent abandoned by the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

By 1856, forty women had joined the order. In the Benedictine tradition, monasteries have stability in a particular geographic area and are independent of one

another, in distinction to the congregational model of large apostolic communities. As the sisters were asked to minister to the children in other areas, the sisters from St. Mary's founded a monastery in Erie, Pennsylvania, who in turn founded a monastery in Covington, Kentucky. In 1867 the sisters came to Ferdinand, Indiana, and in 1879, some sisters from Ferdinand went to Shoal Creek, Arkansas. That community relocated its headquarters in Fort Smith, Arkansas in 1924.

As early as 1957, the General Chapter of the Fort Smith community discussed the possibility of founding a daughter house. The Bishop of Amarillo, Texas, as well as Bishop Marling of the new diocese in Jefferson City, Missouri, invited them to make a foundation in their jurisdictions. In 1964 the Fort Smith community decided to make a foundation in the Diocese of Jefferson City. Sisters from Fort Smith had taught in Moberly, Clear Creek, and Pilot Grove, in addition to ministering at St. Joseph's Hospital in Boonville. Later there was also a house of studies in Columbia and a catechetical center at St. Thomas, Missouri. The community became independent in 1969 and elected Sabina Gillespie as its first prioress on April 5. The community was located at 1511 Wilson in Columbia for twenty-five years, and moved to its present location at 3710 West Broadway in 1995.

There is one more *Sound of Music* connection in our history. Lorna Nash, the realtor who helped us locate the property on West Broadway, sang the role of the abbess in the stage production of the *Sound of Music*. She said that the women who played sisters also were dancers in the scene at the Baron's party, and had to wear rollers underneath their veils!

Mary Jo Polak, OSB

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For a list of sources for this article, contact Sr. Mary Jo at mjplpc@juno.com



Benediktinerinnenabtei
St. Walburg, Eichstatt