

Celebrating Saints at Ohio's Maria Stein Shrine of the Holy Relics

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by Jerri Donohue 11/01/2016



SAINTLY REMAINS. The relic collection is vast. – Courtesy Maria Stein Shrine of the Holy Relics

An inscription above the door to the Relic Chapel of Maria Stein Shrine (online at MariaSteinShrine.org) admonishes visitors to “Enter devoutly, O Pilgrim, for no place is holier than this on the New Continent.”

Built in 1892, the small, sun-drenched chapel in rural Ohio still offers pilgrims inspiration from the saints. This is where the shrine, the former mother-house of the Sisters of the Precious Blood, displays almost 1,200 relics of individuals deemed holy by the Catholic Church.

Despite the chapel's peaceful ambiance, many of the 800 holy men and women represented here died violent deaths for the faith they valued more than life. These include long-ago martyrs and more recent ones, like Blessed Miguel Pro, a Mexican priest executed by a virulently anti-clerical government in 1927.

Matthew Hess, the shrine's coordinator of ministries and hospitality, indicated the wax-coated body of St. Victoria reposing beneath an altar.

“She was a teenager when she was murdered for attending Mass back in the early centuries before Christianity was legal,” Hess said.

To signal her noble birth, Victoria wears a red gown, and one of her hands is flipped back. Several rings rest on her palm, placed there by novices of the Sisters of the Precious Blood when this reliquary was resealed in the 1870s.

St. Victoria's remains were a gift to Father Francis de Sales Brunner of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood. In 1843, the bishop of Cincinnati needed priests to serve German immigrants in his diocese. Father Brunner traveled from his home in Switzerland to the wilds of Ohio, bringing with him relics acquired during a sojourn in Rome. These form the core of today's relic collection.

Maria Stein is named for a Swiss shrine, which Hess said could loosely be translated as “Mary in the Rock.” Standing in an opening in the stone mountainside, the Blessed Mother miraculously caught a little child who toppled off a cliff in the 14th century.

In America, Maria Stein was a convent. As he established parishes, Father Brunner needed women religious to teach settlers' children. In 1844, he called upon the Sisters of the Precious Blood, the community his widowed mother had founded. Within a decade, 244 American-born and European sisters worked with the faithful in Ohio communities.

Aware of Father Brunner's veneration of relics, the sisters surprised him with a four-paneled glass display case framed in metal and lined in red velvet. It held a relic for each day of the year.

The elaborate reliquary now stands atop a glass altar containing bones of early Christians such as St. Concordia.

“This showcases how the Church seeks to regulate relics and to make sure they are documented,” Hess said. “Relics need to have the wax seal and the red ribbon, and the wax seal needs to match the one on the document. Every one of these relics has a document in a big fireproof vault.”

Father Brunner died in 1859, but the collection continued to grow. It is largely displayed in three ornate wooden altars built for this purpose by Schroeder Brothers of Cincinnati. Each exquisitely carved niche holds a relic in a monstrance-style reliquary, surrounded by smaller relics attached to the backdrop.

The main altar houses relics given to the sisters by Father J.M. Gartner. The Milwaukee priest had visited Rome in the early 1870s, a lawless period when robbers looted churches. He rescued relics from pawnshops and street vendors, and Pope Pius IX entrusted him with 175 more to take to America. Father Gartner chose Maria Stein as their permanent home in 1875, whereupon the site became the Shrine of the Holy Relics.

“We have three relics of the True Cross,” Hess said. “The center altar also has a particle from the manger, a particle from the Last Supper table, a thorn from the Crown of Thorns and relics of the Three Kings as well as the Holy Innocents.”

Four plaster statues on the main altar contain relics of the saints they represent: St. Teresa of Avila, St. Aloysius Gonzaga, St. Anthony of Padua and St. Anne, the mother of Mary and grandmother of Jesus.

The altar to the left, featuring the Pietà, holds relics of St. Ursula and her companions. To the right, St. Victoria's remains lie beneath the Sacred Heart altar.

A nearby display honors St. Gaspar del Bufalo, founder of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, while yet another case exhibits relics of St. Padre Pio, Pope St. John XXIII, St. Faustina and other 20th-century saints. A cluster of relics of saints from the Americas includes St. Frances Cabrini, St. Kateri Tekakwitha and St. Elizabeth Ann Seton.

“This collection is still alive and growing,” Hess said. With the assistance of Archbishop Dennis Schnurr of Cincinnati, the shrine contacted the Vatican's Ufficio Liturgico (Office of Liturgy) in 2014 for relics of newly canonized saints.

“We also accept donations from individuals and institutions, if they are not duplicates of our collection and have proper documentation for public veneration,” Hess said.

Although a chart currently identifies individual relics, the shrine hopes to make the information more easily accessible by the end of the year. An “Eshrine app” will let cellphone users locate relics of favorite saints, too.

“There will also be a brief biography of the saint, a picture and a prayer,” Hess said.

In addition, the shrine is installing an iPad mounted on a swiveling arm, enabling visitors to pull up details about reliquaries that interest them.

On Oct. 12, the shrine announced another important change. In January, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization will assume responsibility for the shrine from the Sisters of the Precious Blood with the intention of securing the future of this holy site. A newly established “Legacy Fund” expects to raise the \$6 million necessary to generate income for the shrine's maintenance and operation in coming years.

Hess said events would stay within the life-giving charism of the Sisters of the Precious Blood. Hours of Eucharistic adoration will continue to be offered three times a week. He said, “Of course, right in the center is the Eucharist and Eucharistic living.”

— Jerri Donohue writes from Brecksville, Ohio.