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HERIAGE FFAITH

DESTINATION

Visit Ohio's religious centers
and museums for insights
into the diverse beliefs of the
people who settled our state.

By Ron Rollins

The ways people practice faith are so varied that few of us truly understand the complexities and histories of most religions apart from our own. Some might argue that most of us don't even know our own creeds all that well.

Ohio is blessed, if you will, with a number of places designed to help foster better knowledge of the mysteries of faith — centers that invite visitors to learn more about how others live, pray and worship. Here are just a few of them.

The Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage

Immigration has been a force that changed, and continues to change, the United States — and Jewish immigrants who fled persecution overseas have played a huge part in shaping the America we know today. For the last five years, the Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage has been working to tell the story of those changes and the people behind them — a complex story communicated via artifacts, oral histories, films, artwork, museum exhibits, photographs and more in a striking, state-of-the-art heritage center in suburban Cleveland.

"[The exhibits] tell the American immigration story through the lens of Jewish settlers in Cleveland — the organizations they built, the different neighborhoods they created, and also explains Jewish traditions and observances," says executive director Judi Feniger.

Sheathed in limestone imported from Israel, the 24,000-square-foot structure includes galleries for permanent and temporary exhibitions, a 60-seat theater, a large gift shop and the Temple-Tifereth Israel Gallery, a rich collection of Judaica ranging from ancient scrolls and tapestries to paintings by Marc Chagall.

Exhibits show daily life in Jewish communities, survivor stories from Holocaust victims and details of the founding of Israel. A portion of the museum is dedicated to hate, with documented acts of hatred through the ages, from the Nazis to the Ku Klux Klan. "We are reminded that hatred has occurred since the beginning of time, and that you have to learn from history, or you're doomed to repeat it," Feniger says. "We need to always be reaching out to other communities."

"I think for some visitors, it's very emotional ... some are surprised or shocked if they've never been to a place like the Holocaust Museum (in Washington, D.C.) and seen the graphic things that occurred," she says.

"Some are amazed at what they've learned," she continues. "We're celebrating our fifth anniversary, and we've had great reactions."

Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage

2929 Richmond Rd., Beachwood 44122,
216/593-0575. maltzmuseum.org. Sun., Tues.,
Thur., Fri. 11 a.m.–5 p.m., Wed. 11 a.m.–9
p.m., Sat. noon–5 p.m.



Maria Stein Shrine:

Shrine of the Holy Relics and Heritage Museum

It's commonly known that for most of the history of the Roman Catholic Church, believers have venerated relics — physical remnants of saints, such as bits of bone, hair, ashes and pieces of cloth — as a way to feel closer to God. What many people may not know, however, is that one of the world's largest collections of such relics is housed in a small chapel in rural, west-central Ohio.

The Shrine of the Holy Relics is part of the Maria Stein Shrine in Mercer County, where the Brothers and Sisters of the Precious Blood have kept a convent and church complex since 1846, arriving here to minister to the German immigrants who settled nearby to dig the Miami and Erie Canal. Currently, just the sisters occupy the convent.

"Most of the sisters and priests spoke German," says Sister Mary Ellen Andrisin, who lives and works at the center. "They were from the Benedictine tradition — close to the land, with convents and monasteries in rural settings conducive to prayer. Today, we still have prayer gardens out behind the building, [plus] two chapels ... a Eucharistic chapel and the relic chapel."

Entering the Shrine of the Holy Relics, built in 1892, is like stepping back in time, with its altar and walls packed full of hundreds of reliquary containers, glass and metal boxes, and urns holding pieces of Catholicism's past. More than 1,000 reliquaries containing some 1,200 relics, dating to the beatified Christian martyrs of Roman days, can be seen.

"Most of them were brought here in the 1870s by Father J.M. Gartner ... chancellor of the diocese of Milwaukee — he was visiting Rome and there was lots of [political] unrest, so he brought

ABOVE:

The Maria Stein Shrine's Shrine of the Holy Relics houses more than 1,000 relics of Saints; the Behalt Cyclorama in Berlin gives visitors an overview of Amish and Mennonite history.

a collection of relics from there to the church in the United States, to protect them," Sister Andrisin said. "It was decided that rather than divide them up, it would be wonderful to keep them together as a place for pilgrimage ..."

Holy relics are still added, including a recent snippet of hair from Mother Teresa of Calcutta. The center also has a museum dedicated to the German immigrants, and to the lives and work of the Precious Blood sisters, who saw to the immigrants' spiritual needs while also tending the farm that surrounded and supported the convent. The center receives around 25,000 visitors a year, many of whom arrive for prayer and contemplation in the gardens and chapels.

"The relic I say people always relate to the most, that really touches them, is the relic of the True Cross of Jesus, which has a place of honor on the altar," Sister Andrisin says. "When I'm here, I can feel the presence of all the people who've prayed in that chapel over the years."

Maria Stein Shrine: Shrine of the Holy Relics and Heritage Museum
2291 St. Johns Rd., Maria Stein 45860,
419/925-4532. mariasteincenter.org. Tues.—
Sun. 9:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m.

Amish & Mennonite Heritage Center

Visitors from all over flock to Ohio's Amish communities for their scenic beauty and the old-world charm associated with their best-known residents, the Amish and Mennonite people. To

gain a deeper and richer understanding and appreciation of their faith and history, visit the Amish & Mennonite Heritage Center.

Located in tiny Berlin in Holmes County, the center's focal point is a grand, hand-painted cyclorama painting depicting Amish and Mennonite history and heroes.

The Behalt Cyclorama — "behalt" means "to keep" or "to remember" — is 10 feet high and 265 feet long, starting with the beginnings of Christianity and moving through history to the Reformation, the rise of the Anabaptist movement that gave birth to the Amish and Mennonite sects, and on into the present day. Heinz Gaugel, a German artist who came to admire the Ohio Amish, spent more than a decade on the mural and finished it in 1992.

The center also has a covered wagon that was used by 19th-century Amish immigrants; a pre-Civil War, one-room schoolhouse; a modern-day Amish buggy; an exhibit on farm life; and the largest Amish-related bookstore in the area.

Each year, says Miller, more than 20,000 people visit from all over the country and the world. Most of them are not Amish or Mennonite, and arrive curious about the culture and faith.

"Number one, we hope that when they visit they'll come to understand something of our heritage, and what has led us to become a distinct people," says Paul Miller, director of the heritage center. "And secondly, we hope that they can understand something of their own spiritual pilgrimage and their own faith, and what it means to them." ■

Amish & Mennonite Heritage Center
5798 Co. Rd. 77, Berlin 44610, 877/858-4634.
behalt.com. Mon.–Sat. 9 a.m.–5 p.m.

LEFT: SISTER MARY ELLEN ANDRISIN/MARIA STEIN SHRINE; RIGHT: COURTESY OF THE AMISH & MENNONITE HERITAGE CENTER