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# 175 YEARS IN AMERICA: CELEBRATING THE SISTERS OF THE PRECIOUS BLOOD IN MARIA STEIN

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by Susie Bergman

On a beautiful autumn day, the trees and sky brilliant with God’s magnificent artistry, approximately 40 Sisters of the Precious Blood gathered at their congregation’s original motherhouse in Maria Stein, OH, for a special celebration. These Sisters, along with friends, family and local faithful, came together to honor their history, ministry and role in forming the strong Catholic faith of the area, lovingly referred to as “God’s Country.”

## Early Beginnings

It has been 175 years since the first sisters came to America. They arrived in July 1844 and then moved into their first convent in New Riegel, OH, on December 24, 1844.

Mother Maria Anna Brunner founded the Sisters of the Precious Blood in 1834 at Loewenberg Castle in Switzerland. Mother Brunner’s nightly adoration of the Blessed Sacrament attracted a small group of young women who joined her until her death in 1836. After her passing, her oldest son, Father Francis de Sales Brunner, took over as spiritual director for the order.

In 1843, Bishop Purcell of Cincinnati invited Father Brunner to serve German-speaking Catholics in his diocese. He brought with him seven Precious Blood priests and brothers, along with many of the relics they had acquired over several years. They arrived in Peru, Ohio, at St. Alphonse, the first settlement of the Precious Blood in America.

Within one year, three sisters arrived in the area to begin their ministry of teaching local school children and caring for orphans. The first cornerstone for the original motherhouse was laid on November 16, 1845. In the fall of 1846, Father Brunner dedicated the chapel under the title of Mary Help of Christians, and called the convent “Maria Stein” in memory of the Swiss Benedictine convent of that name.

By 1900, all of the sisters had arrived in America. Between 1844 and 1856, Father Brunner established 10 convents (often called the Ten Foundations) in America. Maria Stein Shrine of the Holy Relics is the only remaining of the 10.

Maria Stein was the motherhouse of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Precious Blood until 1923, when their motherhouse was transferred to Dayton. Maria Stein Shrine remains as the home of the second largest relic collection in the U.S.

## Preserving History

Long time archivist, Sister Noreen Jutte, CPPS, has worked for the past year to refurbish and properly mark the Convent Cemetery at Maria Stein. Between 1878 and 1967, 291 sisters were buried there. The hallowed ground, gracefully adorned with beautiful trees and white fencing, is the final resting place of 530 Sisters. The cemetery was closed to burials in 1967.

The refurbishment includes new bronze plaques for the sisters, as well as for orphans who were buried alongside the sisters, and for a maintenance man and chaplain.

Other improvements included cleaning the existing stone monuments and pouring new concrete walks.

“As the constant physical presence of the Sisters of the Precious Blood is no longer here, we need to be mindful that the spiritual presence of these exceptional women is still with us,” said Matt Hess, director of ministry at the Shrine. “This place, and those who rest here, are an inspiration for the future and not to be relegated to the shrine’s history.”

## Honoring the Legacy

As the sisters gathered around the newly refurbished cemetery, Father John Tonkin, Rector of Maria Stein Shrine, blessed the grounds and honored the sisters for their commitment to serving others in the name of the Precious Blood of Jesus. While the lives of the sisters today is vastly differently than those who settled there 175 years ago, their values and faithfulness to Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament remain.

After the blessing, everyone met inside the shrine’s upper room for a special presentation from former congregation president, Sister MaryAnn Bremke.

It’s been a long time since we have had so many sisters present at the Shrine. It’s a wonderful feeling and we are honored to have them with us today,” said Maria Stein Shrine President Don Rosenbeck.

## Foundations for the Future

As the size of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Precious Blood continues to decline (it peaked at 800 members in 1965 and currently has only 101), so does their presence in Maria Stein. One of the last



Photo by Michelle Bodine



Photo by Susie Bergman



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sisters remaining in the area, Sister Barbara Ann Hoying, who dutifully served at the shrine for over 20 years, just recently announced her retirement and relocation to Dayton.

“It’s been a bittersweet transition since the sisters officially entrusted the Shrine to us in 2017,” noted Hess. “Everyone who works or volunteers here in any manner is protective of what this place is and means. It’s a place where some people come to rediscover their faith and where others come to deepen theirs. It’s where young children learn about the history of the area and the saints, and where older pilgrims come to relive memories of the sisters and relish in the majesty. It means something different, yet so much, to so many. And it’s our job to respect and protect it.”

For more information on Maria Stein Shrine and the Sisters of the Precious Blood, visit [mariasteinshrine.org](http://mariasteinshrine.org).