

“Like living beings, monasteries seem to have their own genetic code, physical characteristics, and personality traits. They represent a unique blending of history, geography, struggle, and chance, along with the myriad influences of the people over the decades who walked through their doors. Mount Angel Abbey has a compelling story to tell, propelled by the fullness of its long life. Father Joel Rippinger’s novelistic telling of that story gives this monastery the care and attention it deserves.”

—Judith Valente, OblSB, author of *How To Live: What The Rule of St. Benedict Teaches Us About Happiness, Meaning and Community*; *Atchison Blue: A Search for Silence, A Spiritual Home and A Living Faith*; and *The Art of Pausing*

“Fr. Joel has condensed 140 years of Mount Angel Abbey’s history into a well-constructed 190-page narrative. He situates the abbey’s story in the political and religious history of Europe and North America. He has made very good use of monastic archives. I hope that his work inspires others to tell us more about the personalities and the material and spiritual history of this fascinating community.”

—Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB  
Monastery of the Ascension, editor of *A Benedictine Reader: 530–1530*

“Rippinger’s book is a welcome contribution to the story of American Catholicism and American Benedictine history in particular. With a keen historical sense and deftness of narrative style, the author tells the story of one monastery’s faith-filled journey—the story of a community of men sometimes imperfect and broken, yet intrepid in their search for God, the pursuit of holiness, and service to the church. Mount Angel Abbey’s story is not theirs alone. It belongs to the church and bears witness to the truth that transfiguration does not happen without risk and hope-filled perseverance. *Struggle and Ascent* is a work that affirms the ‘good news’ of how God works in the church and in the world.”

—Ephrem Hollermann, OSB, author of *The Reshaping of a Tradition: American Benedictine Women, 1852–1881*

“Fr. Joel Rippinger’s latest contribution to American monastic history, *Struggle and Ascent: The History of Mount Angel Abbey*, presents a fascinating story in an engaging style. He situates well the 140-year history of the oldest Benedictine Abbey west of the Rockies within the context of both the history of the American Northwest and the history of the church in the United States. What is especially attractive is the way Rippinger weaves biographical sketches of interesting community members and in-depth treatment of various works of the Abbey into the overall historical narrative. The framework of ‘struggle and ascent’ enables him to treat head-on the missteps and scandals that occurred while finding good reason to affirm the resilience, the faith, and the contribution to the life of the church in the Pacific Northwest that rightly characterizes the monks of Mount Angel Abbey through the decades.”

—Abbot Benedict Neenan, OSB  
Conception Abbey, Conception Missouri

“As a protestant pastor and Benedictine oblate with Mount Angel, I’ve made regular pilgrim retreats every year up to Mount Angel Abbey over the past two decades. The vision from the hilltop reminds me of being at Monte Cassino, where Benedict wrote in the Rule that we ascend by descending along steps of humility. Following the steps and pages of this well-written historic narrative, through the many challenges and celebrations of life in community, we see anew the vision of Benedict’s Rule lived out daily among the monks through lives of stability, fidelity, and obedience to Christ since the 1880s.”

—Rev. Dr. David Robinson  
Oblate of Mount Angel Abbey, author of *Cloud Devotion: Through the Year with The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Lead Pastor, Cannon Beach Community Church, Cannon Beach, Oregon

“In the footsteps of their monastic predecessors, Benedictines arrived in the Willamette Valley in 1882 to build up the church and culture through their prayer and work. Fr. Joel’s narrative of Mount Angel Abbey vividly portrays the cross at the center of monastic life, manifesting its power through human weakness. Mount Angel, persevering through the flaws of its leaders and a multitude of calamities, such as fire, presents an image of the entire church, stably standing on the mountaintop through all difficulties.”

—R. Jared Staudt, PhD  
Archdiocese of Denver and Augustine Institute, author of  
*The Beer Option*

# Struggle and Ascent

*The History of Mount Angel Abbey*

Joel Rippinger, OSB

Foreword by  
Abbot Jeremy Driscoll, OSB



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To my parents, Joseph and Helen Rippinger,  
whose model of service and stability sustained my  
Benedictine vocation and who both went to the Lord  
as I was writing this history



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# Foreword

**S**TRUGGLE AND ASCENT—this brief title summarizes the history of Mount Angel Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in the state of Oregon, of which I am the twelfth abbot. As of this writing, our monastery has existed for 138 years, and the story of those years is a gripping one. Certainly there is *struggle*, both to establish a monastery and then to survive. And the monastic charism itself is also about a spiritual struggle. With the struggle there is also *ascent*—on a literal level the establishing of the monastery on a hilltop in the middle of the Willamette Valley, and on a spiritual level, the fruits of the struggle. These are archetypal patterns of the monastic life, the striving and desiring that characterize it, the combination of horizontal and vertical movements both at once.

It is with joy and satisfaction that I introduce this volume of Fr. Joel Ripinger's history of Mount Angel Abbey. I myself have lived here as a monk for the last fifty years. Orally, I know many of the stories of our history, and fifty years is some of the story, too. I knew for many reasons that it would be good to have a careful account of this history, a setting down of events and consequences in an order that they could be shared and understood. I hoped for a serious reflection on the significance of all that has happened at Mount Angel in decade after decade of faithful, though never easy, monastic living.

So, shortly after I became abbot in 2016, I approached Fr. Joel and invited him to research and write our history. I knew that he was someone who could do this and that he had already done a good deal of the remote preparation needed for such a project. I knew this from his valuable history of *The Benedictine Order in the United States, an Interpretive History*. In that book, Mount Angel's history was briefly fitted into the history of the whole Benedictine movement in this country,

beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century and continuing into the present. I remember reading that book years ago and sensing then that its author would have much more he could say about Mount Angel if given the opportunity. Now I was in a position to offer him that opportunity. With the gracious consent of his religious superior, Abbot John Brahill of Marmion Abbey, Fr. Joel enthusiastically accepted my invitation to research and write a history of Mount Angel Abbey.

We agreed that I would give him complete access to our archives and leave him entirely free in his interpretation and presentation of the story. It was to be a story told from the outside, with the objective standards of a trained historian and the familiarity that a monk himself would have with the nature of the monastic materials he was handling. The results are here, and it is these results that give me the joy and satisfaction I already mentioned in being able to present this volume.

I confess that one of my interests in having this history written has to do with my own monastery and its monks in the present times. Younger monks especially, but even monks of my generation and older, do not really know the details of how much hardship, setback, and resilience have made it possible for us to live the monastic life we have here today. A remarkable heritage and tradition have been bequeathed to us by those who preceded us here. It would be unseemly, to say the least, to live our lives today unaware of the deep values and sacrifices that have made Mount Angel what it is today.

Every monastery has a unique face, style, atmosphere, mood, and energy. This comes from the vow of stability that Benedictines make, a vow that binds them to a place and to a particular community for life. And in each place a monastery must make changes as it moves forward in new times, facing new situations that emerge often only in that particular place and with that particular group of monks. It is a monastic ethos to cling close to origins, to receive from one's elders an already well-established way, to carry on with what has been received even while facing new situations and so changing accordingly. As abbot, wanting to instill in my own community this ethos, I saw that this history could help me. I want us at Mount Angel to be able to say, yes, there is a monastic way of doing things and within that way, there is also a Mount Angel way. Father Joel's history is the story of the shaping of that Mount Angel way. How did it come about that

we at Mount Angel are who we are today? And given that, how do we regard this treasure received, and when do we risk change? I am asking the question that stands behind the motto of my predecessor Abbot Bonaventure: *Nova et Vetera*, new things and old. Indeed, new things and old. “What will it be?” is the question every monastery faces every day in all its monastic ways and practices.

What I just explained is a more personal reason for wanting this history. I also wanted it to be known to a larger public because I know that the story could deservedly draw the attention of anyone interested in the history of monasticism in this country and, indeed, in church history in general in the United States and beyond. This is a story that edifies but can also raise eyebrows and even, occasionally, shock. There is deep holiness and fortitude, but also broken vows and ill-advised decisions. There is fire that destroys, and more than once; and there is embezzlement and abuse and sometimes almost no money to go forward. And yet the place and the enterprise survive and even in some seasons thrive.

Is this not the mystery of the whole church? Are there not lessons here also for other monasteries and other parts of the church and also for those who just observe religious quest in general or the human drama in general? What happens when people search for God, when they try hard to build something, when they try to give themselves completely away? Mount Angel’s history demonstrates in many concrete ways what the monastic virtues are, what the monastic contribution is to church and world, what are the struggles of many and most of us in trying to persevere in a task for a lifetime. Sharing Mount Angel’s story with a wider audience is another reason I wanted Fr. Joel to write this history. Mount Angel’s story told is not boasting. There is nothing to boast about here. This story is a celebration of grace—of God’s faithfulness to us, of God’s mercy and forgiveness, of the fruits of trusting in God. Grace’s story shows as well how much God can bring out of persons in trials, struggles, and darkness. We are still here. A miracle, a huge grace. The story of the whole church. The story of Mount Angel.

Still another reason prompted me to invite Fr. Joel to the task he has so ably performed with this history. The year 2020 is the 900th

anniversary of the founding in 1120 of our monastic motherhouse, Engelberg, in Switzerland. It has had a continuous existence since then. Fr. Joel's story of Mount Angel situates its founding by Engelberg in the context of events in Switzerland in the mid-nineteenth century. Those events led to the founding by Engelberg of, first, another monastery in the United States, Conception Abbey, in Missouri. For the complex reasons that are told in the history recounted here, some Engelberg monks from that Conception foundation split from the original group of its founding party of monks and eventually established Mount Angel. But that inception of Mount Angel was fragile in the extreme. Mount Angel would never have survived without the commitment and, alas, the suffering and worry of the heroic and wise abbot of Engelberg, Anselm Villiger. But not only that. Without Abbot Frowin Conrad of Conception—originally a monk of Engelberg and from whom Mount Angel's party of founders had separated themselves—Mount Angel would never have survived. Father Joel recounts here the role of Abbot Anselm and Abbot Frowin, and he relates a story heretofore untold, throwing into clear relief what crucial players they were in carrying Mount Angel through its turbulent and fragile first decades.

Adelhelm Odermatt, Mount Angel's founder, was also a gifted monk that Engelberg sacrificed to its adventure in America. He was both the inspiration of so much of Mount Angel's unique monastic face and also, somehow not infrequently, the source of some of its most serious early problems. Abbot Anselm of Engelberg guided him, corrected him, chided him, and encouraged him, expressing in all this a fondness and love for the Mount Angel project. He urged Abbot Frowin to do the same and gave him special authority to do so in a monastery that was still canonically dependent upon Engelberg. Father Adelhelm accepted all this—usually with humility—and carried on. Meanwhile, other monks from Engelberg, some of their best from that epoch, were sent by Abbot Anselm to Mount Angel. Some came for a while; others ended their long lives at Mount Angel. In short, during those nine hundred years of Engelberg's continuous monastic life, some decades of the last half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth were years in which that venerable monastery sacrificed much to pour its spirit into two American houses: Conception and Mount Angel. That spirit still lives in all three monastic houses, unique in each place

but also clearly one same family. So, this history means also to be a tribute to Engelberg in its 900th year and a profound thank you from the depths of Mount Angel's heart to its beloved motherhouse.

Finally, both Fr. Joel and I feel the privilege of publishing this monastic history with Liturgical Press of St. John's Abbey. This press through its long existence has contributed so much to the making known of monastic history and theology and even more to what all monks hold dear—namely, the liturgy itself, its history, and its deepest significance. To have Mount Angel's history included among the projects of Liturgical Press is an honor not lost on us. I sincerely hope this story told can be a celebration for all the Benedictine monasteries of this country. We are planted in this land from such solid origins in Europe, of which our holy father St. Benedict is the patron.

As he would say: *Ut in omnibus glorificetur Deus!*

Abbot Jeremy Driscoll, OSB  
Abbot of Mount Angel Abbey



# Preface

**M**ONASTERIES ARE THE REPOSITORIES of stories. Mount Angel Abbey has witnessed a generous catalogue of those stories in its faith-filled passage from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. The intent of this historical narrative is to introduce readers to the larger story of Mount Angel. It is one interpretation of that story, given through the lens of someone who comes from outside the Mount Angel monastic community. However, it comes from the perspective of an observer who carries a deep appreciation for this story and the characters who shaped it. For many years I have worked with historical material that has allowed me to become familiar with some of the major figures in the Mount Angel history. I also have benefited from studying it within the wider narrative of American Benedictine history. In the process, it has become evident to me that this is a story that deserves to be told and to have a wider audience.

Like so many other monasteries, Mount Angel has had its share of challenges. Its two great fires and the community's subsequent determination to rebuild are markers of the resolve displayed by monks in the face of adversity. The anti-Catholicism and anti-German prejudice they experienced were of a piece with what many of their fellow monasteries suffered, though there was a distinct quality to the way those prejudices played out in the state of Oregon. Mount Angel, like most monasteries, had its cast of colorful characters. This roster of characters includes outstanding leaders and men of great holiness. The educational legacy left by Mount Angel is one that loomed large in the historical record of the Northwest. That legacy of teaching broadened beyond Oregon to embrace Native American outposts in remote islands, foundations in Canada and Mexico, and the personal witness of monks who became known as master teachers and scholars.

The history of any monastic community is closely aligned with the unique features of its place and the people it serves. This is partly due to the charism of Benedictine stability. It is also due to a factor that can never be overlooked in the course of monastic history—the indelible imprint left on a place and people by a community of vowed members, a monastic cohort committed to giving a witness to the Gospel and to a venerable standard of holiness as realized in the Benedictine tradition of a love of learning and a desire for God.

There was, from the earliest years, a clear and compelling witness from monks at Engelberg Abbey in Switzerland and Conception Abbey in Missouri that the mission of the monastic founders of Mount Angel was one that was worthy of their support. This became evident even in the most precarious and trying stretches of Mount Angel's history. No amount of financial insecurity or scandal or setback could stay the force of that faith. Left to its own resources and human potential, one can only question Mount Angel's ability to survive through the early years of its history. It received help from a medley of sources that helped to lift the fortunes of the community in its pioneer period.

It is my sincere hope that the history of Mount Angel Abbey will serve as a stimulus for a wider audience to draw from the lessons and learn from the human models that were so instrumental in that history. My personal wish is that the faith that carried the Mount Angel community through many physical challenges and moral crises will serve as an animating force in promoting a greater understanding of the monastic tradition for the benefit of future generations.

# Acknowledgments

**T**HE WRITING OF THE HISTORY of Mount Angel Abbey is an undertaking that merits acknowledgment of a variety of people and sources.

I will start with Abbot Jeremy Driscoll of Mount Angel. It was Abbot Jeremy who first invited me to take on this task, granting assurance of his personal support and the resources of his community. Among those personal resources is Fr. Augustine DeNoble, longtime archivist of the Abbey, whose familiarity with the written sources of Mount Angel's history and whose personal recollections of the same were invaluable aids. Br. Cyril Drnjevic and Br. Ansgar Santogrossi were most helpful assistants in the project, contributing their time and expertise in research and wise counsel on procuring material for the history. Archivist Brian Morin and his staff in the community archives, particularly Elizabeth Uhlig, proved to be ready and willing resources in scanning photos and retrieving added information from the rich trove of the abbey's archival holdings. Among the personal interviews I conducted with the monks of the community, special thanks go to former abbots Peter Eberle, Nathan Zodrow, and Gregory Duerr and to the current abbot, Jeremy Driscoll. The hospitality afforded me by the Mount Angel community over several years has been another gift that is part of this project. Having a place of prayer and beauty in which to do research was a beneficial by-product of my work.

I need to give thanks to my own superior of Marmion Abbey, Abbot John Brahill, for providing permission to undertake this project and allowing me the time and space needed to complete it. All of my confreres at Marmion Abbey deserve to be included in that, especially as they have given me the latitude to finish the project.

Liturgical Press deserves a note of gratitude as well. Their willingness to provide their professional assistance in editing and publishing this book is deeply appreciated. Peter Dwyer and Hans Christoffersen were wise and supportive publishers, and Stephanie Lancour was a patient and extremely helpful production editor.

Lastly, I owe a sincere gratitude to several generations of monks of Mount Angel Abbey, whose faith and determination to give an authentic Benedictine witness provided me with the means to narrate a story with elements of heroism, holiness, and hardship. It is a story that attests to the richness of the historical legacy of Benedictine life in Europe and America, and the countless graces that continue to flow from such a vibrant life lived in seeking God. My sincere hope is that in sharing this story the invaluable gift of monastic life and those who support it will be duly enriched.

# European Background

LIKE SO MUCH OF AMERICAN HISTORY, the record of American Benedictines is closely tied to the European continent. For the monks of Mount Angel, the connection rests with the Abbey of Engelberg in Switzerland. The stimulus that led to German-speaking Swiss monks coming to Oregon in the 1880s is part of a complex chain of events. Examining those events and the people at their center constitutes an essential beginning to Mount Angel's history. There remains at the heart of Mount Angel's effort to develop a distinct monastic identity a spiritually genetic strand of firmness of purpose and sense of duty that hearkens back to the Swiss motherhouse.

The Swiss Abbey of Engelberg dates back to the twelfth century. Much like its American foundation in Oregon, it suffered loss through a succession of destructive fires, as well as the ravages resulting from the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the Napoleonic Wars. The monastic membership of the community came close to extinction with an outbreak of the plague in the late sixteenth century. The most damaging of the fires in the first half of the eighteenth century totally destroyed the abbey church and required extensive rebuilding. Much of the struggle between political authority and religious autonomy that precipitated a crisis for Engelberg in the nineteenth century was focused in the *Sonderbund*, the Swiss civil war that began in 1847. In the wake of that conflict, a number of Benedictine educational institutions in the country were secularized, and some monastic communities were suppressed.

## 2 *Struggle and Ascent*



Painting depicting Engelberg Abbey and its surrounding valley in central Switzerland.



Abbot Anselm Villiger, the fifty-second abbot of Engelberg Abbey and founder of Mount Angel Abbey.

Because of the fear of possible suppression, the Swiss Abbey of Einsiedeln sent monks to North America in 1854, where they established a community in Saint Meinrad, Indiana. Among the motives for this move was that of securing a possible American refuge for Einsiedeln Abbey in case of closure by the Swiss civil authorities.

It was in these tumultuous years that Engelberg Abbey elected a new abbot, Anselm Villiger. He became abbot in 1866 and continued in that role until his death in 1901, a remarkable span of thirty-five years. He was to play an integral role in the establishment and growth of Mount Angel. The clos-



Fr. Frowin Conrad (left) and Fr. Adelhelm Odermatt (right) at Engelberg, prior to their departure to North America in 1873.

est observers of the beginning stages of Mount Angel's development rightly credit the determination and guidance of Abbot Anselm as perhaps the most telling factor in Mount Angel's spiritual and material viability.

There were two other figures in the community at Engelberg who were central to the early history of Mount Angel. One was Fr. Frowin Conrad. Father Frowin, the eldest of twelve children, made his monastic profession at Engelberg in 1853 and was ordained to the priesthood in 1858. In the first fifteen years of his priesthood at Engelberg, he served as a prefect and professor in the school, pastor at the local parish, novice master, librarian, and chaplain to the Benedictine Sisters in nearby Maria Rickenbach. He also spent time in theological studies at the Abbey of Einsiedeln, where he made the acquaintance of Fr. Martin Marty, a young priest-monk of the Abbey of Einsiedeln who was to become the principal founder of Einsiedeln's first American foundation of St. Meinrad in Indiana, and a prominent figure in persuading Engelberg to make its initial American foundation.

The other member of the Engelberg community who served as a central figure in Mount Angel's founding and early history was Fr. Adelhem Odermatt. Entering Engelberg in 1865, he had Fr. Frowin as his novice master. He was then an assistant to Fr. Frowin in the parish of Engelberg and a professor at Engelberg's school. Father Frowin's junior by eleven years, Fr. Adelhelm was a visible contrast to him both in personality and physical bearing. The bearded and solidly built younger monk towered over the diminutive and clean-shaven Fr. Frowin. One of the more graphic descriptions of Fr. Adelhelm was given by Fr. Edward Malone, the historian of Conception Abbey, who highlights some of his distinctive personality traits: "Father Adelhelm . . . manages to give the impression of a mild ecclesiastical boomer, but at the same time the deep dedication and inexhaustible energy of the dedicated missionary are clearly discernible. He is the always enthusiastic Swiss and the nostalgic Engelberger."<sup>1</sup> Anyone who traces the stages of Fr. Adelhelm's monastic life cannot help but detect in his person a continuous current of religious zeal, one that was accompanied by an outspoken and sanguine temperament. He was the yang to Fr. Frowin's quiet and reflective monastic yin.

## Beginnings in North America

It was the former classmate of Fr. Frowin, Abbot Martin Marty, who became the precipitator of Engelberg's initial venture in North America. In 1872, Abbot Martin, as the recently elected first abbot of St. Meinrad Abbey, referred a request from Bishop John Hogan of Saint Joseph, Missouri, to have a Benedictine presence in his diocese to the Abbey of Engelberg. At the same time, Abbot Martin sent several letters to his friend Fr. Frowin, urging him to have his community accept the request, knowing that the Engelberg community was facing the same fear of dissolution that Einsiedeln had faced years earlier. One can presume that the letter had its desired effect, since the Engelberg chapter of monks voted in January of 1873 to accept the request from Bishop Hogan in Missouri.

1. Edward Malone, OSB, *Conception* (Omaha, NE: Interstate Printing, 1971), 119.

The expectation of Engelberg Abbey for the proposed new foundation might best be calculated on what they had witnessed in other monastic foundations made in the United States in previous decades. The string of monasteries founded by Abbot Boniface Wimmer, from his first Benedictine community in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, in 1846, was marked by an activist thrust of service to immigrant Catholic populations that were largely, but not exclusively, German-speaking. They included an educational component of schools for immigrants and seminaries that would serve to staff the sacramental needs of the local churches. Lay brothers constituted a large part of the composition of these communities, and the monks worked in concert with communities of Benedictine women that had been established nearby. The foundation made by Einsiedeln Abbey at St. Meinrad, Indiana, in 1854, mirrored some of these same characteristics. Extensive parish work was accepted at St. Meinrad as both a service to the immigrant and a means of material support for the community. A seminary school was started and a nearby community of Benedictine sisters was established. Whether consciously or not, Engelberg would employ many of these same elements in the monasteries they established in America, along with their purported wish to have a geographic refuge from the potential perils of European politics.

## Missouri Roots

So it was that Fathers Frowin and Adelhelm left Engelberg for the United States in early 1873. On the way, Fr. Frowin stopped at the Abbey of Beuron in Germany. There he was to meet with the two founders of that monastery, Abbot Maurus Wolter and his brother Fr. Placidus Wolter. Father Frowin was given from the abbot a *Ceremoniale*, a liturgical book of ceremonies, that he intended to use as needed upon arrival in America. When the two Engelberg pioneer monks arrived in New York in May, they made their way across the eastern United States, stopping in Pennsylvania, where they met with Abbot Boniface Wimmer at St. Vincent's Abbey in Latrobe. They then traveled to St. Meinrad, Indiana, where they were welcomed by Fr. Frowin's friend, Abbot Martin Marty. Fathers Frowin and Adelhelm were invited to spend several months at St. Meinrad, honing their language skills and

CONCEPTION ABBEY AND COLLEGE, MO.

7780018076



A postcard image of Conception Abbey from the early 1900s.

also deriving benefit from Abbot Martin's advice on how to go about making a new monastic foundation in America. Father Fintan Mundwiler, Abbot Martin's prior at St. Meinrad, did the necessary advance work in Missouri with Bishop Hogan to prepare adequate lodgings on site for the Engelberg monks. In September of 1873, Fr. Frowin and Fr. Adelhelm traveled to Conception, Missouri, to begin their work.

Father Frowin was aware of the desire of Abbot Anselm Villiger to secure a place of refuge in the United States as a result of the threats by the Swiss government to close Catholic institutions. The Engelberg community made this clear in the chapter minutes of that year when they declared that, in the event of the suppression of Engelberg, the American foundation was to give asylum to any members of the Engelberg community.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Fr. Frowin was intent upon establishing a truly monastic community, rooted in the best traditions of Benedictine prayer and observance. By contrast, Fr. Adelhelm's main intent was on developing a pastoral presence among the immigrant Catholics of Nodaway County, Missouri. Within the first few years,

2. Copies of chapter minutes of July 20, 1873, from Engelberg, translated copy in Mount Angel Abbey Archives (hereafter MAAA).

their differing ideals of Benedictine life became more obvious. Father Frowin served as superior of the monastic community at Conception and employed the liturgical and monastic practices of the German Abbey of Beuron to lay the basis of what he hoped would be a solidly formed Benedictine monastery. Father Adelhelm lived apart in the nearby town of Maryville, where he exercised a role as both parish priest and superior over a house of monks and of Benedictine sisters who had come from Switzerland. The separate monastic paths the two Swiss founders adopted were becoming more defined.

By 1875 tensions began to appear between the more cloistered ideal of monastic life advocated by Fr. Frowin and a more actively engaged one of Fr. Adelhelm. These differing points of view were channeled through letters that Fr. Adelhelm sent back to Engelberg and Abbot Anselm. The flashpoint of those tensions was what Fr. Adelhelm characterized as an overly partial emphasis Fr. Frowin was giving at Conception to the practices and model of the German Abbey of Beuron rather than to the Swiss customs of the motherhouse. There was substance to Fr. Adelhelm's critique. By this time, Fr. Frowin had been in frequent contact with Fr. Placidus Wolter of Beuron. He had adapted the *Ceremoniale* at Conception and was intending to possibly send young monks at Conception to Beuron for part of their formation. Father Adelhelm's critical opinions on what he saw at Conception were reinforced by those of a monk of Einsiedeln, Fr. Ignatius Conrad, a brother of Fr. Frowin, who had taken up residence in Maryville. Reactions to these letters appear in the diary of Abbot Anselm in 1875 and 1876 and they were sharply critical of the Conception superior.<sup>3</sup> The ensuing rebuke that Fr. Frowin received from Abbot Anselm in an 1876 letter, with its implied threat to replace Fr. Frowin with Fr. Adelhelm as superior at Conception if the Beuronese practices were not discontinued, was a bitter blow for Fr. Frowin. But he was obedient to the Engelberg abbot's command, and he tried for a time to implement Swiss customs at Conception in place of those of Beuron. What was

3. The diary of Anselm Villiger is an invaluable tool for understanding Abbot Anselm's views on the foundations in North America. A monk of Mount Angel, Fr. Ambrose Zenner, translated substantial sections of that diary while working at Engelberg. It is those translations, found in MAAA, that are used here.

now clear to Fr. Frowin was that Fr. Adelhelm and his own brother Fr. Ignatius were the principal players in convincing Abbot Anselm of the “harm” being done through the Beuronese practices.

Father Frowin rededicated himself to nurturing a monastic community at Conception, an effort that would result in achieving independence from Engelberg in 1881, when he was appointed as the first abbot of Conception. This appointment reflected on the part of Engelberg a less rigid insistence on the American house following to the letter all of the customs of its Swiss motherhouse than had previously been the case.

During this time, Fr. Adelhelm continued to reside at Maryville. There he cultivated an alternate monastic model, staying at arm’s length from Conception’s community. In the course of his seven years there, he incurred a substantial debt, much to the chagrin of Fr. Frowin. It was to be a harbinger of things to come. Unlike most of the other monks in Missouri, Fr. Adelhelm expressed his reluctance to transfer his vow of stability from Engelberg to Conception. In fact, he had already promoted the independence of a group of Benedictine sisters allied with him in Maryville, and this seemed to spark an interest in his doing the same for monks. For a time, Fr. Adelhelm considered making a separate monastic foundation in Maryville. Not providing Fr. Frowin with any information on this plan only sowed more seeds of suspicion on the part of Fr. Frowin once he found this out.

With a mixture of hurt and surprise, Fr. Frowin wrote in his journal:

Today I received through Father Ignatius [Conrad] a copy of the letter our Rt. Rev. Abbot has written to the Bishop [Hogan] of St. Joseph, to recommend to him the Fathers Nicholas and Adelhelm for support in founding a new monastery here [in Missouri]. It is dated January 6. The contents of this letter appear to me unexplainable in many regards. May the Lord turn this whole trial to our good.<sup>4</sup>

Nor did it sit well with Bishop Hogan, who believed one monastery in his diocese was quite enough. Bishop Hogan too was wary of the im-

4. Journal of Frowin Conrad, February 11, 1881. Fr. Frowin’s *Tagebuch*, or journal, remains a prized primary document. It records the key events in Mount Angel’s history over the course of almost fifty years. A partially translated copy exists in the Archives of Conception Abbey (hereafter CAA).

pulsive character of Fr. Adelhelm's plans and did not contemplate kindly what he considered a maverick plan to build a replica of a Swiss Abbey in his diocese.

All the while Fr. Adelhelm continued his written correspondence with Abbot Anselm, presenting to him a plan that would permit him to make another monastic foundation, separate from Conception Abbey. By the close of 1880, Fr. Frowin was resigned to the fact that Fr. Adelhelm would not become a member of Conception Abbey and was intent upon starting his own new Benedictine community. In that same time, Fr. Adelhelm won over a fellow monk of Engelberg, Fr. Nicholas Frei, to assist him in carrying out his pioneering project. The disappointment all of this engendered on the part of Fr. Frowin is registered in an entry in his journal in early 1881:



Fr. Nicholas Frei, a monk of Engelberg, accompanied Fr. Adelhelm on his search for a site for Mount Angel.

Father Adelhelm has allowed his worldly spirit to grow and he no longer even wears the cowl. This division among us has not left a good impression on the bishop. The whole affair has caused me great grief and it all came without my knowledge. I do not believe that if the bishop were in the possession of all the facts he would so easily have given permission for this private enterprise. But unfortunately, a decision has been reached without giving me the time to make my views known. My talks with Father Nicholas [Frei] have convinced me that our views of religious life are so far apart that we could never agree. Father Adelhelm, it seems to me, paints too rosy a picture of the prospects for a new foundation.<sup>5</sup>

5. Journal translation of Frowin Conrad, February 17, 1881, CAA.

Father Frowin's apprehension and intuition about the projected monastery proved to be well founded. It did not help that Fr. Adelhelm's departure left him with the need to replace a well-loved pastor at Maryville and the likelihood of Engelberg Abbey focusing its material and personal resources not on Conception, but on its *Neue Engelberg*.

## Looking for a New Engelberg

Fathers Adelhelm and Nicholas departed from Maryville at the end of May in 1881. They had received permission from Abbot Anselm to explore areas of America's West to find a locale for a new community. At this point in Engelberg's history, the option for an American refuge was still very much in play. Abbot Anselm indicated as much in a letter sent in early January of 1881:

From the beginning of this priory, the ordo, customs and traditions of the motherhouse at Engelberg will be carried out in as praiseworthy a manner as possible, and observed exactly, so that my confreres may find for themselves in America an acceptable and friendly refuge . . . should our monastery and common life be dissolved by the wicked government of Switzerland.<sup>6</sup>

Father Adelhelm, in particular, entertained a conviction that the West would offer the best choice of options for the new monastery. A template for him was the expansion of the monasteries of Abbot Boniface Wimmer and the American Cassinese Congregation whose spread had grown westward.<sup>7</sup> Father Ambrose Zenner, after intensive study of the correspondence between Fr. Adelhelm and Engelberg, attributed to the former the notion of building up a string of monastic houses along the West Coast of the United States, all of them dependent upon a Swiss motherhouse. The communities would be sustained by farming and parish work, and they would concentrate on spreading the faith to the local populace. The plan was significant not only for its grandiosity

6. Letter of Anselm Villiger, January 6, 1881, translated copy in MAAA.

7. Letter of Adelhelm Odermatt to Anselm Villiger, October 19, 1881, translation in MAAA. In this letter Odermatt envisioned the states of California, Oregon, and the territory of Washington, all offering the promise of locations for future monasteries.

of scale but for its understandable dependency on a European source for initial personnel and funding. It was a plan that never received any formal approval on the part of the monastic chapter at Engelberg, but one that propelled the early exploration of Fr. Adelhelm.

The travels of Fr. Adelhelm and Fr. Nicholas took them to Nebraska, the Dakota Territory (where they encountered then Bishop Martin Marty and Abbot Fintan Mundwiler of St. Meinrad), Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and California, as well as Oregon and the Washington Territory. They had the opportunity to spend time first in Denver with Bishop Machbeuf, in Pueblo, in largely Mormon Salt Lake City, in the area of Archbishop Joseph Alemany's San Francisco archdiocese and Bishop Francis Mora's Los Angeles diocese. The two monks left San Francisco on July 26 by boat and arrived in Portland on August 3, where they met Archbishop Charles Seghers. In the following weeks, they visited the Rogue River country near Jacksonville and the Willamette Valley near the towns of Fillmore and Sublimity.

In the time since their departure from Missouri, the two Swiss monks managed to traverse much of the western landscape of the United States. As they considered all of their options, it only whetted their appetite for the unbounded potential of a new Benedictine monastery that would be planted in that landscape.

The view that Fr. Nicholas carried of America after his western journey was not at great variance from that of his fellow traveler. It employed a mixture of pessimism about the prospects of monasticism's future in Switzerland and optimism about the potential of America. Writing to Abbot Anselm from Oregon, Fr. Nicholas echoed these two contrasting sentiments:

I want to look at things as calmly as possible. Yet I can't help but think that Engelberg needs to take advantage of the present opportunity offered to it. Assuming the worst, the Swiss monasteries and other houses are likely to be swept away. If that is the case, I could not see any more pleasant and suitable locale for our confreres than this valley. What a huge area of activity is given to American monasteries is something with which you are already familiar.<sup>8</sup>

8. Letter of Nicholas Frei to Abbot Anselm Villiger, August 15, 1881, archives of Engelberg Abbey, translated copy in MAAA.

# Recovery and Growth

## Another Leadership Transition

THE HEALTH OF ABBOT BERNARD took a turn for the worse in 1933. An operation to correct his failing eyesight in New York City was not successful. The abbot was legally blind, and his ability to lead the community effectively was curtailed. He was fortunate to have as his second-in-command Prior Fr. Jerome Wespe. Father Jerome was a steady and saintly presence, respected by all in the community. He was another of the stalwart monks of the founding generation who became an icon of stability and monastic observance.

Father Jerome deserves a privileged place in the select circle of indispensable people for Mount Angel's growth in the first half of the twentieth century. His twin roles of prior and master of ceremonies for the period between the wars were invaluable gifts to the community. As prior, he was the epitome of duty, finding a way to maintain order and decorum even in the trying months after the fire of 1926. As master of ceremonies, he kept contact with European centers of monastic life, especially his beloved Beuron. He adapted much of their liturgical and monastic ritual to Mount Angel and insured that it would be accomplished with reverence and regard for tradition. It was a tradition he passed on to his successor as master of ceremonies, Fr. Robert Keber, who had been immersed in the monasticism of Beuron through his studies at the *Academia Benedictina* in Maria Laach. It seemed fitting for someone who had internalized much of the important events of Mount Angel's history that in the last year of his life Fr. Jerome served



Fr. Jerome Wespe cutting wood.

as official archivist for the community, safeguarding the story he had lived so intensely.

Overriding his sense of duty, there were few monks who could match the reputation for sanctity that Fr. Jerome demonstrated by his way of life. From the lay brothers he served at the Milk Ranch in his early years as a priest to the long lines of confreres who would claim him as their confessor in the years after he served as prior, Fr. Jerome left a template of holiness of life and single-mindedness of monastic commitment. He truly became a backbone for the community's recovery after the fire.

With the counsel of his canonical adviser, Fr. Augustine Bachofen, and at the prompting of Abbot Philip Ruggle, abbot president of the Swiss-American Congregation, Abbot Bernard submitted a request for an abbot coadjutor to succeed him in exercising legitimate authority and governance of the monastery. The petition of Abbot Bernard was granted and on August 1, 1934, an election was held.

Given the dominant role Fr. Jerome played as prior in managing abbey affairs during the extended periods of Abbot Bernard's absence and his long and distinguished service to the community, many thought he would be the natural choice of the community as the next abbot. However, as the monks gathered for the election, Fr. Jerome deliv-



The community on the day of the election of Abbot Thomas Meier, August 1, 1934.

ered an unambiguous statement that he was not a candidate and would not accept the position if elected.<sup>1</sup>

It was no surprise that the chapter then turned to the subprior and novice master, Fr. Thomas Meier, as the fourth abbot of Mount Angel. Abbot Thomas was raised in Salem, Oregon, and received his education from the high school at Mount Angel. Like his predecessors, Abbot Thomas served the community in a variety of ways. He had been a prefect in the college for three years, and for two years was head of the college. He served as master of clerics and novices for a number of years until the time of his election. Abbot Thomas was given charge of a community of eighty-two monks. It was a mix of forty-five priest-monks, twenty-four lay brothers, eleven monks in various years of formation before solemn profession, and two claustral oblates who lived in the monastery with a promise of obedience to the abbot. The stage was set for Abbot Thomas to institute a number of changes in the life of the community.

A priority in order of change was to be in the liturgy of the monastery. One of the first appointments made by Abbot Thomas was for

1. *Abbey Chronicle* XXIX (1934), 6. Father Jerome was given a well-deserved vacation in Europe by Abbot Thomas after the election, only to come back again as prior upon his return.

Fr. Victor Rassier to go to the Abbey of Solesmes in France for a year of intense study of Gregorian chant. This was to be in preparation for the decision of Abbot Thomas to implement the French Solesmes chant at Mount Angel, a change from the German chant they had used previously. Abbot Bernard and Fr. Jerome Wespe had already promoted a return to some of the choral and liturgical practices of Beuron and Solesmes, and Abbot Thomas continued in this vein. Accompanying this change was a restoration of sung vespers in July of 1936. This was ordered by Abbot Thomas to be in accord with the practice that had been in place in the earliest years of the abbey and to enhance the dignity of the Divine Office. Father Victor, as choirmaster, instructed the community in the use of their new choir books and set up regular practices for the schola and the monastic choir. A more intricate protocol of choir etiquette was also established.<sup>2</sup> Another way of underlining the dignity of the liturgy was to have all professions of vows take place at the daily High Mass rather than the Communion Mass in the early morning.

In subsequent years under Abbot Thomas there was an installation of a pipe organ (1938), and more formal training was given to the monks for liturgical practices. These liturgical changes were in part precipitated by a visit that then-Fr. Thomas Meier had made in 1928 to abbeys of Europe, a period when the Liturgical Movement was well underway. In many ways, this was a reprise of the model Abbot Bernard had left, consciously distilling through personal integration the liturgical and aesthetic bounty of European monasteries. The initiatives of Abbot Thomas were endorsed too by several of the Mount Angel monks, such as Fr. Martin Pollard and Fr. Luke Eberle, who had been exposed to the Liturgical Movement firsthand during their stay in European abbeys such as Maria Laach while studying in Europe. It ensured that Mount Angel would have a window to new liturgical developments well before other communities on the West Coast. Perhaps the best example of this was seen in the introduction of the *Missa Recitata* in early 1938 for the seminarians and the laity.<sup>3</sup> This was the form of the Mass, using St. Andrew Missals with parallel texts in Latin and English, that encouraged the congregation to respond to the prayers from the priest. Supported by Archbishop Howard and

2. "Highlights of 1936," *Abbey Chronicle* XXXII, 5.

3. *Abbey Chronicle* XXXIV, 5.



Photo of Abbot Thomas Meier and Archduke Otto von Hapsburg, October 13, 1949.

guided by some of the monks of Mount Angel who had taken part in this liturgy at Maria Laach in the 1920s, it offered one of the first models of active participation of the congregation in the liturgy, long before the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

Abbot Thomas, when he served as novice master under Abbot Bernard, was responsible for the training of candidates for the clerical monks—those who would be going on for priestly ordination—and for lay brothers. In this he paid particular attention to the condition of the lay brothers. For example, the brothers had a separate chapel for their prayers, along with a separate recreation room. In the refectory, the place of the brothers was in the middle of the dining room, at tables covered with an oilcloth (unlike the linen at the other tables) and with knives and forks with wooden handles, unlike the silverware of the rest of the community.<sup>4</sup> This was not unlike conditions in other Benedictine houses in the United States at the time. At Mount Angel,

4. From oral recollections of Fr. Thomas Brockhaus, Mount Angel Abbey Archives (hereafter MAAA).

Abbot Thomas recognized an ongoing challenge. On the one hand, he had to meet the needs of the remaining German-speaking brothers, who were content to pray separately from the community and practice their crafts and the maintenance of the monastery. On the other hand, he saw the need to take account of the new American vocations among the brothers who wanted more inclusion into the community life. In an effort to respond to the wishes of the American-born lay brothers, Abbot Thomas proposed that all of the prayers in the Brothers' Chapel would henceforth be in English. The change seems to have produced its desired effect, with the German-speaking brothers joining their younger confreres.<sup>5</sup> As part of this change, Abbot Thomas proposed to the chapter that they allow the lay brothers to occupy places in the choir stalls during Divine Office and the daily High Mass. While the community agreed that the brothers should be seen as part of the community, they felt that the distinction of separation should remain.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, Abbot Thomas found ways to bring about a greater incorporation of the lay brothers into the mainstream of community life. He recalled Fr. Francis Burger from Christie Industrial School and appointed him as new director of the formation of the lay brothers. He requested that Fr. Augustine Bachofen be a regular preacher and lecturer for the lay brothers.<sup>7</sup> This latter move gave greater legitimacy to an equal spiritual formation for both prospective priest-monks and brothers. Another means of encouraging greater adaptation for the brothers was the decision of Abbot Thomas to send brothers to St. Meinrad in the 1940s to study and learn of the new methods of instructing American-born brothers that had been organized there by Abbot Ignatius Esser. This was in tandem with a summer trip by Fr. Clement Frank, the master of brothers, to visit several abbeys for the purpose of studying the different methods of training lay brothers.<sup>8</sup> All of these efforts served as one more sign of the Americanization or assimilation process that took place at Mount Angel in the two decades after World War I.

Mention should be made of the role played by Fr. Augustine Bachofen as a visiting monk during much of Abbot Thomas's tenure.

5. *Abbey Chronicle* XXX, 6.

6. Chapter minutes of November 30, 1939.

7. Diary entry of Fr. Augustine Bachofen, Archives of Conception Abbey (hereafter CAA).

8. *Abbey Chronicle* XXXVIII (1942), 6.



Br. Fidelis Schoenberger feeding chickens.

Fr. Augustine was a European-born and educated monk of Conception Abbey. He was a renowned canon lawyer who published the first English commentary on the *Code of Canon Law* that was issued in 1917. It ran to eight volumes and was published between 1918 and 1922. One constant in the long arc of Fr. Augustine's monastic life was his opposition to the Beuronese influence in the Benedictine Order, and this may have been a principal reason why he decided to leave Conception and go to Mount Angel in 1926. He was present at the time of the fire, and one of his rare open compliments given to the community as a whole was the manner in which he described them becoming more unified in the months and years after the fire. Even though he was a professed monk of Conception Abbey, he remained at Mount Angel until his death in December of 1943, when he was buried in the abbey cemetery. He taught in the seminary and served as a canonical consultant for Abbot Bernard. He kept a diary that provides keen insight and unsparing critiques on the life and times of Mount Angel in the seventeen years of his stay there.

Some of the criticisms leveled by Fr. Augustine were pointed and important for superiors to hear. For example, he chided those who had the fraters teaching in the college even as they were enrolled as students in the seminary.<sup>9</sup> He rightly noted that it went against canon

9. Diary entry of January 5, 1931, CAA.

law and placed both a physical and psychological burden on the fraters. In a similar critique, he did not think it prudent to ordain monks after their third year of theological studies, arguing that they should complete their full program of study first. There was an anti-authoritarian streak in Fr. Augustine's life. His relationship with abbots at Conception Abbey and Mount Angel was a tense one. Much of that can be attributed to his sardonic take on superiors, a sentiment found in a diary entry of 1936: "Most of our abbots—not all—are barking dogs at General Chapters and Culpa Chapters and know damned little about the psychology of the men they have to deal with. And we have to tolerate them forever!"<sup>10</sup> Yet this coarse critic of abbots was mindful of the latitude he was given at Mount Angel by Abbot Bernard and Abbot Thomas and knew that he was "tolerated" far more than he expected to be.

Father Augustine is representative of another strain of the life at Mount Angel. He was manifestly an intellectual, well-read, and admired for his experiences of travel and interaction with church leadership. The fact that he felt comfortable in writing sometimes biting commentary in his diary and was uncensored in his classroom teaching and while preaching in parishes says a great deal about Mount Angel's adaptive capacity for individual characters. No less it underscores the fact that monk-scholars found Mount Angel a receptive place to continue their work at a time when the life of those pursuing intellectual efforts was not often given primacy of place in religious orders.

### **New Ventures in British Columbia and Changes in the Schools**

In 1938 Abbot Thomas announced that the long established Native American missions on Vancouver Island in British Columbia would be handed over to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. This represented the close of a long and dedicated presence of Mount Angel monks at these missions. As has already been noted, the Mount Angel chapter had voted in 1899 to attend to these missions, and many monks had devoted the better part of their lives to serving the needs of the native population. They had shared in this with Benedictine women of Queen

10. Diary entry of January 19, 1936, CAA.

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