

# The Benedictine Abbey of Engelberg

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## History

The Abbey of Engleberg in Switzerland is the "grandmother abbey" of the Monastery of the Ascension. It is located in a mountain valley at the foot of Mt. Titlis in central Switzerland, thirty miles from Luzern. "Engel berg" means "the mount of angels."

The monastery was founded by Konrad von Sellenburen, a nobleman whose castle stood on a spur of the Utiliberg near Zurich. At his request, the first monks and their Abbot Adelhelm came from the Abbey of Muri in Aargau in 1120. Ratification by Pope Callistus and Emperor Henry V followed in 1121. The Abbey has a great, most colorful past due to the vicissitudes of time, with periods of enormous flourishing interrupted by decline due to fire, revolutions, the plague and internal difficulties.

At the beginning its status was rather precarious but under the second abbot, Frowin (who came from the Abbey of St. Blasien in the Black Forest) the Abbey was put on a sound legal, monastic and economic basis. At that time, Engelberg was established as an independent monastic state (subordinate only to the Emperor). In the late Middle Ages Engelberg came under the protection of the Estates of the Swiss Federation; the abbey's political jurisdiction was finally dissolved in 1798.

Abbot Frowin founded a scriptorium and library that flourished under him and his successors. After a disastrous fire in 1305, a new church was built and consecrated in 1325. On the following day, the Bishop of Constance dedicated many nuns in the "lower convent" to the service of the Order. The nuns' monastery was founded in the 12th century on a site below the monastery. In 1190, it received a church of its own. In 1615 the convent was transferred to Sarnen where it is still located.

Engelberg played an important part in the movement of mysticism that spread throughout South Germany and Switzerland in the 14th and 15th centuries. Switzerland's most notable representative of this movement, Brother Niklaus Flue became the Swiss national Saint. Abbot Barnabas Burcky (1506 -- 1546) raised the standard of the monastery, both material and spiritual. Abbot Burcky was active in promoting the welfare of the people in the valley. However, the results of his efforts were short-lived, due again to the ravages of the plague and other unfortunate circumstances. Abbot Jakob Benedikt Sigerist, who reformed the organization of the monastery, restored its decaying legal status and its proprietary rights.

The settlement continued to prosper under a number of worthy successors until a catastrophic fire on August 29, 1729, reduced church and monastery to ashes. Abbot Emmanuel Crivelli (1731 -- 1749) built the present church and reorganized life in the monastery. The French Revolution brought far-reaching changes to the valley with important consequences for the monastery. Fr. Karl Stadler, then financial manager of the monastery, helped steer the monastery through the

troubled times of the Napoleonic invasions, so that monastic life continued and the Abbey was able to make a successful start into modern times.

Abbot Placidus Tanner (1851 -- 1866) promoted expansion of the monastery school. In 1909, the school assumed its present status of a 7-grade grammar school of humanities designed to prepare students for the Swiss maturity certificate. In addition, the monastery runs a 3-grade secondary school.

Abbot Anselm Williger (1866-1906) founded two abbeys in the United States (Conception, MO and Mount Angel, OR). In Switzerland he founded the convent at Niederrickenbach and played an important part in establishing the convent at Melchtal.

Beginning in 1932, monks of the Abbey did missionary work in the former French Cameroons, and in 1964 they founded a dependent priory there. In 1943, a home for poor and socially handicapped children was established in the buildings of the Benedictine Abbey of Fischingen in Eastern Switzerland (suppressed in 1848). Later, monastic life was revived there by monks from Engelberg. All these activities demanded increased staff and extension of the monastery and the school buildings, carried out under Abbott Felimann (1914 -- 1929) and his successors.

## Buildings

After the great fire of 1729, the rebuilding of the church and monastery was completed in 1737, in the early baroque style. In comparison with the impressive buildings of Einseideln or St. Urban, the church and monastery at Engelberg look austere. In spite of its simplicity, the church has a cheerful, festive atmosphere enhanced particularly by the stucco work. The ornamentation in rococo style is most pleasing. Of great beauty is the main altar with a painting combining the themes of the Assumption and the Trinity. God the Father is depicted on the face of the clock above as the Lord of Time: the hand of the clock revolves around a point in God the Father's hand. The frescoes on the ceiling relate the life of Mary; the two series at the sides depict scenes from the life of St. Benedict. The choir pews are simple but dignified. The tabernacle is richly ornamented in metal.

The ground plan of the church is a rectangle unbroken by transept or apse. Nave and choir form one architectural unit: the first two altars mark the division between the monks' place of worship and that of the laypeople.

The simple monastery buildings adjoining the church are grouped around a rectangular courtyard. The entire complex, including the farm premises in the southwest, fits admirably into the mountain setting. The most impressive parts of the monastery are the Great Hall, the guests' refectory, and the library, all of which boast exquisite woodcarvings. The library contains an important collection of manuscripts, many written in the Engelberg scriptorium.

Of the sacred objects in the church the Romanesque Engelberg cross, in wrought silver on wood, merits special attention. It was commissioned by the monastery under Abbot Heinrich (1197 -- 1221) from a gifted craftsman as a receptacle for a relic of the Holy Cross.

## Abbey and Town Today

Currently, about 40 monks (one third of them brothers) work in the garden, kitchen, sacristy, library, infirmary, arts and crafts, administration, hospitality, development projects, science, school, pastoral care and parish. Berchtold Muller is the current Abbot.

The inhabitants of Engelberg, a warm-hearted people marked by individuality of character, have always benefited from the ministry of the Abbey in their midst.

This "place" surrounded by majestic mountains exudes peace and serenity, your spirit is uplifted and any Benedictine heart is gladdened. Come and see. Indeed, Father Meinrad spoke the truth when he called Engelberg "Paradise."