

Mount Angel Abbey

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In 1882, the Monastery of Engelberg officially founded the abbey of Mount Angel, the "mother-abbey" of the Monastery of the Ascension. The founding prior was Fr. Adelhelm Odermatt. He had earlier accompanied Fr. Frowin Conrad, who was founding a monastery in Missouri. The new monastery in Missouri was to serve as a refuge should their own abbey in Engelberg be suppressed. Father Odermatt, with fellow monk, Fr. Nicholas Frei, searched for a new site, and after having explored Omaha, Denver and San Francisco he settled on the Grave's Butte near the town of Fillmore in western Oregon and renamed the site Mount Angel (translation of the name of his Mother Abbey of Engelberg).

The young community lived in nearby Gervais until 1884, while the work of buying the various land tracks that dissected the hilltop was going on. In 1887, upon the initiative of Archbishop Gross, the community opened a college and, in 1888, the Benedictine Press. In 1889, again upon the insistence of the Archbishop who was an educator, Mount Angel Priory opened a seminary, the second on the west coast, and now the oldest in existence west of the Rockies. The first great setback the young community suffered was the destruction of the monastery, church and seminary by a fire in 1892. The first prior, Father Adelhelm, was replaced so he could devote all his efforts to soliciting funds to pay off the debts incurred in the buying of land, rapid building and now rebuilding. He was successful, and in 1903, the community moved into a new building complex and resumed its monastic and educational apostolate.

In 1904, the priory was elevated to an abbey. The first abbot, Father Thomas Meienhofer, a Swiss native, had entered the young struggling American foundation as a result of the extensive vocation work by Father Adelhelm. The first monks were of course sent out from the Engleberg Abbey. The first student monks were from the college at Engelberg. With the establishment of its own college, Mount Angel soon received Americans of Irish, Italian, Polish and German extraction. Thanks to the Benedictine Press and its German publications, many German families sent young men to Mount Angel College, some of whom became monks.

The apostolates of the Abbey were diversified. The monks staffed several parishes and offered other assistance in parishes. They also served in Indian missions on Vancouver Island.

The second abbot, Fr. Placidus Fuerst (1910 -- 1921), presided over a decade of growth in personnel and the consolidation of various apostolates. After his resignation, the community elected as third abbot, Fr. Bernard Murphy, a native of Portland, Oregon.

In 1926, the second monastery, seminary and college were destroyed by fire. Younger monks now began to help with soliciting funds for rebuilding. Part of the new Abbey was dedicated in 1928. Aquinas Hall was erected in 1930 and the gymnasium in 1936.

After retirement of Abbot Bernard, now blind, Fr Thomas Meier became the fourth abbot in 1934. The age of specialization had also arrived. The community was blessed with sufficient vocations and sent some monks to Europe for higher education and advanced degrees. Greater emphasis

was placed on the monastic life, community, Eucharist and private prayer than had been possible in the early days of great activity and need. In 1939, the community celebrated the centennial of the coming of the first Catholic missionaries to the Oregon Territory and sent a group of monks to found its first new monastery in British Columbia. The abbey's Mount Angel College was closed in the 1940's and the community devoted itself to the seminary -- theology, college and high school -- and to the local high school for boys.

After the resignation of Abbot Thomas, because of poor health, in 1950, Fr. Damian Jenges was elected fifth abbot. A new abbey Church was dedicated in 1952, and a new seminary residence hall in 1954. The temporary buildings over the side of the hill were used to house Mount Angel Preparatory School until this was transferred to the archdiocese and then to the public school system.

In 1965, the monks of Mt. Angel voted to establish two new monasteries: Ascension Priory in Idaho and Our Lady of the Angels in Cuernavaca, Mexico. The second Vatican council and the renewal efforts within the Church brought about renewal of monastic life, seminary life and the priestly apostolates.

The sixth abbot was Fr. Anselm Galvin (1974 -- 80), followed by Abbots Bonaventure Zerr (1980 -- 88); Peter Eberle (1988 -- 97); Joseph Wood (1997 -- 2001); and Nathan Zodrow (2001 -)

Although vocations to the abbey have decreased somewhat, the monastery still staffs three local parishes, operates a guest house, and devotes most of its resources to the operation of Mt. Angel Seminary, which serves some 200 students, the majority of whom are studying to be priests. Mount Angel has had a flourishing oblate program under the leadership of Fr. Bernard Sander, OSB, who beginning in the 1950s was a champion of the role of the laity in the church.