

# THE PILGRIMAGE TRADITION OF MARIAZELL

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Several years ago, during one of my research junkets, I discovered three pilgrimage booklets to the Shrine of Mariazell. These booklets were printed by and for the use of the Corpus Christi Brotherhood of the Cathedral of Saint Stephan in Vienna, Austria (1755-1757). Brotherhoods, named for a mystery of the faith or a patron saint, were devotional organizations that promoted pious practices, corporal and spiritual works of mercy, and were affiliated with a church or monastery. In Austria, they were at their zenith during the golden age of the Viennese Baroque and the re-Catholicization of Vienna, which was concurrent with the reign of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles VI (1711-40). Membership was unrestricted: men and women of simple and noble rank, lay and religious, including members of the royal and imperial family. Among their pious practices was the pilgrimage, of which each brotherhood had its own special location. For the Corpus Christi Brotherhood it was the Marian Shrine of Our Lady of Mariazell in Styria, Lower Austria, the “national sanctuary” of Austria and the symbol of “Austrian piety.”

The three booklets were relatively small, measuring approximately 3 x 5 inches, if that much. They were wonderfully worn and even a bit gritty to the touch—which simply added to their personality and integrity. The title page of each gave the invocation of the pilgrimage: “Mary, Salvation of Christians,” or “Mary, Comfort of the Distressed.” The booklets provided the songs, prayers, and schedule for the journey (both to and from) Mariazell, an annual practice that some sources say began as early as 1632. The custom of printing a pilgrimage booklet is one that has endured at many pilgrimage churches. Those printed by the National Shrine are comparable in content and practice.

In the 18th century, the calculation of time followed a form of “daylight saving time.” This did not require the adjustment of timepieces

but rather of “business hours.” Thus, there were winter hours, calculated from the feast of Saint Michael (September 29) to Easter Sunday, and summer hours, which were the reverse. According to *The Golden Legend*, the medieval best seller on the lives of the saints, the principal “time of pilgrimage” was from May 18 to November 27. While capitalizing on the extended daylight hours, it also symbolized the “eschatological march” of the faithful, the pilgrimage of life, which leads to the end time and the hope of salvation.

The summer worship schedule at Saint Stephan’s began with the singing of Lauds at 4:00 a.m., followed by the celebration of the first Mass of the day. On the first day of the pilgrimage, at the end of the first Mass, the members of the brotherhood gathered at the main entrance at 5:15 a.m.

to begin their 10-day pilgrimage on foot. They followed the main road that led out of the city in a southerly direction, while singing the first song in the booklet. The melody was indicated by the phrase, “to the tune of” and the name of a familiar hymn, others by the phrase “in the preceding tune.” In addition to hymns there were rogations and litanies, which required only a droning response, such as “*Kyrie eleison*” (Lord, have mercy). As this brotherhood was “very old ... and highly esteemed,” a corps of “trumps and tymps” often accompanied the pilgrimage. On special occasions the “imperial trumpeters and tympanists” and singers from the Hofkapelle were added. Quite often, they too were members of the brotherhood.

Landmarks such as farms, villages, churches, and monasteries calculated the route. Directives told pilgrims what to pray or sing when the procession approached certain landmarks. At a specific monastery or church, the pilgrimage paused for the celebration of Mass, benediction, or some other devotion. In time, the route was marked with stone markers. Today, shields using specific logos mark the pilgrimage network throughout Europe. These shields or signs are



Corpus Christi Brotherhood book, Charles VI



Imperial tympanist



Saint Rupert Way, Salzburg to Alttötting

unique to each locale, including language, materials, artistry, and sometimes even accuracy. The shield, like the geographical pilgrimage, is

symbolic of an inner journey, a guide that tells each pilgrim if he or she is on the right path.



Via Sacra

The route that the Corpus Christi Brotherhood traversed is the oldest pilgrimage route in Austria: the *Via Sacra* (not to be confused with the *Via Sacra* of Rome). For more than 850 years, “humble pilgrims” and privileged nobility have walked this 80-mile route. Winding its

way through the rolling hills of the Vienna Woods, climbing the Mostviertel Mountains (Alpine foothills), descending into scenic valleys, and visiting monasteries and churches of historic and religious importance, the trail is magnificent in its beauty and, at times, challenging in its passage. As the members of the brotherhood walked this route, they prayed “six rosaries ... daily.” Among the list of those remembered in the prayers of this pilgrimage were the deceased souls who had at one time made the journey. Traditionally, the rosary is the prayer of choice on pilgrimages, for groups and individuals alike, because of its mantra structure.

The splendor of the pilgrimage is partially recounted in the list of “the necessary ‘burdens’ to Mariazell,” in the inventory of this brotherhood. The “burden” or freight list includes canopies and poles, banners and flags, wind lanterns, torches, a cross, robes, and a trunk for the trumpets. All of which was not only part of its splendor but also part of its piety and spirituality. The waving of banners and flags was to repel the “evil one,” who was believed to rule the air (cf. Ephesians 2:2);



Engraving, 1780 Mariazell

the carrying of lighted candles, torches, and lanterns symbolized “burning faith”; and the raised cross, “Christ triumphant.”

On the afternoon of day four, the procession arrived at the shrine of Mariazell. Once inside a “high Mass was sung.”

The fifth day, a “free” day, began with a sung high Mass at 6 a.m. at the altar of the miraculous Madonna. This was followed by a sermon. At this time in liturgical history, the sermon was separate from the celebration of Mass. Not all priests were “certified” to preach. This was determined by education and aptitude. Their abilities were similarly designated in their titles, “preacher,” “pilgrimage preacher,” and “feast day preacher.” Pilgrims often expressed their devotion or their repentance by individual acts of penance



Marizell Holy Card



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or supplication, such as ascending the main stairway on their knees with arms outstretched or carrying heavy blocks of stone. Others carried a cross on their shoulders and walked designated routes of repentance. Pilgrims purchased candles at the huts located around the shrine, to offer inside the church. As mementos of their journey they also purchased little sacramentals such as a medal or simple holy card.

The return journey began on day six, with a similar program and prayer obligations as on the first four days. The brotherhood arrived “solemnly” at the cathedral of Saint Stephan on day nine. The following day, at 10 a.m., the “Sermon of Thanks” was given, the *Te Deum* sung, and a high Mass was celebrated, bringing the pilgrimage to its end.

For centuries, the Shrine of Mariazell in Austria was the dedicated pilgrimage church of the House of Habsburg. In 1728, Empress Maria Theresia (1717-80) made her first Holy Communion here, thereby uniting her personal eucharistic piety with her Marian devotion. The Empress faithfully embraced traditional Marian devotions such as the daily rosary, for which a priest within the imperial household was appointed as the “prayer leader.” In 1857, the occasion of the 700th anniversary of its founding, Kaiser Franz Joseph I (1830-1916), “in the manner of simple pilgrims,” led a pilgrimage of 27,000 to this holy shrine. The last Habsburg Emperor, Charles I (1887-1922), who had been an enthusiastic participant in

donor of the Mariazell replica housed at the National Shrine (1992). The next day the body was taken to the cathedral of Saint Stephan for the state funeral and burial. As a footnote, on Sunday, March 14, 1943 the fifth anniversary of the German occupation of Austria, a solemn Mass was celebrated in the Crypt Church of the National Shrine at the initiative of Austrians living in Washington, for the restoration of their country. Otto von Habsburg, Archduke of Austria, was present at the Mass.



Otto von Habsburg

In September 2007, Pope Benedict XVI made a pilgrimage to the shrine of Mariazell, the “Great Mother of Austria” (*Magna Mater Austriae*), in honor of its 850th anniversary (1157-2007). Following the path of the pilgrims of old, the Holy Father made a devotional stop at the monastery of



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pilgrimages and a devoted member of a Marian brotherhood and Marian devotion, visited this shrine on his honeymoon. In 2011, the body of his son, Otto von Habsburg (1912-2011), the last Crown Prince of Austria-Hungary (1916-19) and the head of the Imperial House of Habsburg until 2007, lied in state in this church, where one of the six Requiem Masses was offered by Bishop Egon Kapellari, the



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Abbey Church at Heiligenkreuz



Saint Leopold III

Heiligenkreuz or “Our Lady of the Holy Cross,” the second-oldest Cistercian monastery in the world, and the oldest continuously active Cistercian monastery. This monastery pre-dates Mariazell and is one of the first stops along the *Via Sacra*. It was founded in 1133 by the margrave of Austria (Saint) Leopold III, who is also the patron saint of Austria. The Chapel



Replica of Our Lady of Mariazell

of Our Lady of Mariazell at the National Shrine includes a sculpted bronze head of Saint Leopold III.

The following April (2008), Pope Benedict visited the National Shrine and celebrated Vespers with the American bishops in the Crypt Church. The papal entrance procession entered the Crypt Church through the Chapel of Our Lady of Mariazell. This chapel at the National Shrine is filial to the one in Austria. It contains a centuries old, hand-carved, exact replica (19 in. / 48 cm. tall). It is a “sealed” replica, which verifies its authenticity and makes available to the pilgrim the same graces and indulgences as praying at the shrine in Austria. It was the first chapel at the National Shrine to be donated on the initiative of a foreign head of state, with donations by both Austrians and Americans of Austrian descent. This initiative underscores the enduring nature of this devotion to the people of Austria and their descendants.



Mariazell seal

Each place of pilgrimage has its own history, devotion, and tradition that speaks with the voice of generations long past. Like the pilgrimage routes that crisscross central Europe, there was also a network of brotherhoods (or confraternities) and sodalities that promoted this pious practice. There were the Marian Congregations or Sodalities of the Jesuits; “Rosary brotherhoods” of the Dominicans; “Scapular brotherhoods” of the Carmelites, Servites, and Trinitarians; “Belt brotherhoods” of the Franciscans, and Augustinians; and “Guardian Angel brotherhoods” of the Clerics Regular of Saint Paul (Barnabites). The Chapel of Mariazell is one of the many chapels and oratories of the National Shrine that is tethered to this ancient and venerable tradition of pilgrimage and brotherhoods. 🙏