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**A Swiss-German Abbey at Conception, Missouri:
Its Establishment and
Its Century-Old Basilica and Murals—
The Fate of a Prime Example of Medievalism in America**

Introduction. The Conception Abbey Basilica is a center of the living Benedictine monastic tradition. As the Basilica stood at the end of its first century, in 1991, it was one of the Swiss-American Congregation's and Missouri's greatest treasures of nineteenth-century Christian art and architecture.

Benedictine monks from the abbey at Engelberg in Switzerland founded the monastic community at Conception on the Missouri frontier in 1873. Within two decades a stately monastery and the Abbey Basilica dedicated to the Immaculate Conception had been consecrated and decoration of the Basilica interior was in progress with murals painted in the Beuronese style. This style of painting Christian and particularly Benedictine subjects was developed by the painter-monks, Peter Lenz and Jakob Wüger, at the southwest German Benedictine archabbey of Beuron on the Danube. Beuronese style became a nearly canonical style for the Benedictine order in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and was exported from Germany to eastern Europe, the Low Countries, Italy, and to North and South America.

The Beuronese pictorial murals with their painted frames and architectural ornamentation on the walls and vaults of the Conception Abbey Basilica were still nearly intact at the centennial of its consecration on 10 May 1991. This program of painting was designed to cover the whole interior of the German Neo-Romanesque-style Basilica. The murals in the Basilica and in the monks' refectory comprise a collection of nearly fifty large-scale wall paintings with approximately life-size figurative compositions.

The most immediate models for the Conception Abbey murals were once preserved in Europe at the Benedictine Emaus Monastery in Prague and at the Benedictine motherhouse at Monte Cassino. Both monasteries were destroyed during World War II. The architecture and the original murals at Conception

Abbey are of highest quality and are imbued with the profound optimism and spirituality brought to America by the Swiss and German monks of the founding generation. The nearby affiliated Benedictine convent at Clyde and its Basilica-type Chapel of Perpetual Adoration, which is completely decorated with Beuronese-style mosaics, is also a part of this treasure of monastic art and life.

Early European Settlement. The first European settlers in the area of Conception appear to have come about 1846.¹ They were followed about a decade later by a larger group of mostly Irish Catholic immigrants.² These Irish families, for want of continued employment on the railroads in Reading, Pennsylvania, had organized the Reading Land Association, a company to purchase government land in the western states. In spite of certain legal machinations against it³ and with the support of an Irish priest, Father James D. Power, the Reading Land Association established a colony near the Platte River in northwest Missouri in 1856.⁴ They named the colony Conception in honor of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. A search lasting well over a decade for a monastic community to minister to the Catholic settlers would soon begin.

The Search for a Monastic Community. In 1860, the archbishop of St. Louis requested, on behalf of Father Power, Cistercian monks from the Abbey of Mount Mallery in Power's home county in Ireland. The Cistercians declined to settle at Conception, however.⁵

Increasing hostilities connected with the American Civil War, for a while, postponed further attempts to find monks for Conception. Renewing the search for monastic help in 1865, Father Power approached the Benedictines of St. Vincent's Abbey in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, with whom he was well acquainted and who favored settlement in Missouri. The archbishop of St. Louis, however, refused permission for a monastic establishment at Conception.⁶

Father Power continued his mission travels on horseback which over the years had taken him through Missouri, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, and Wyoming. Such travels were becoming increasingly difficult for the priest, now in his sixties; by 1870 Father Power was in urgent need of additional priestly support. His seemingly tireless efforts to find monastic help were ultimately to be rewarded and remote northwest Missouri would be chosen by a Swiss Benedictine house as its site for colonization in America.

Engelberg Abbey Answers the Call. In the early 1870s, the increasing settlement of German Catholics in northwest Missouri occurred coincident to a developing political climate in Switzerland which appeared to threaten the very existence of monastic communities in the Swiss state. The Jesuits had been expelled and some Benedictines feared that they might also be forced to

leave. In 1871, the Benedictines at Engelberg monastery, who during their entire seven-hundred-year history had founded no other monasteries, decided to begin seeking places of safe refuge outside Switzerland.⁷ Within four years, two affiliated Benedictine houses were to be established at Conception and Clyde, Missouri. Both traced their origins to Benedictine establishments in the Swiss canton of Unterwalden south of Luzern. The abbey at Conception, Missouri,⁸ became the very first monastic foundation of the twelfth-century Swiss Benedictine abbey at Engelberg.⁹ The sisters of Clyde came to Missouri from the Swiss convent at Maria Rickenbach.¹⁰ These Benedictine sisters had been called by the Conception Abbey monks within a year of the founding of their monastery.

Father Power's original Irish majority at Conception had become a minority.

The trend toward the predominance of German families among the immigrants is very noticeable after the Civil War in the Conception community. . . . By the year 1870, Father Power found that his "Irish Colony" had become an Irish-German colony with the Germans predominating. When Frowin Conrad [the Swiss monk who was to become the first abbot at Conception] made his first report to Abbot Anselm of Engelberg in 1873 he announced that the colony contained 35 Irish families and 65 German-speaking families.¹¹

Church political reorganization in Missouri which led, in 1868, to the creation of a new diocese in St. Joseph, Missouri, also produced conditions more favorable to the establishment of a monastery at Conception. Father Power's close friend, Father John Joseph Hogan, who understood the desperate need for priests in Catholic frontier communities, was now bishop of the newly formed diocese at St. Joseph.¹² The promise of satisfying the mutual interests of the Catholic settlers at Conception and the Benedictines of Engelberg would lead to the settlement of the Swiss and then German Benedictines at Conception.

A call in November 1872 from the diocese in St. Joseph, Missouri for help in the pastoral care of an increasing population of German-Catholic immigrants had been sent to the Benedictines of St. Meinrad Abbey in southern Indiana. Unable to respond to this call by sending monks, St. Meinrad's first abbot, Father Martin Marty, who had come to Indiana from the Swiss Benedictine abbey at Einsiedeln, had transmitted the call from the bishop of St. Joseph to the abbey of Engelberg in Switzerland. Abbot Marty, who was a former classmate of Father Frowin Conrad of Engelberg Abbey, had received a request near the end of 1871 from his classmate Frowin for help in finding a suitable place for a new foundation for Engelberg Abbey in America. From this time on monks from the abbey at St. Meinrad,

Indiana—especially Abbot Marty and Father Fintan Mundweiler—would serve as key intermediaries and advisors for the fledgling Benedictine settlement named New Engelberg at Conception, Missouri.¹³

The First Monks from Engelberg. On 27 April 1873 Fathers Frowin Conrad and Adelhelm Odermatt set out from their motherhouse at Engelberg for America. They traveled by way of Einsiedeln, Switzerland, and Beuron in Germany. At Beuron, Abbot Maurus Wolter gave the two missionaries "a copy of the constitution of Beuron, a book of rules for the guidance of novices and a copy of the Beuron 'Ceremonial.'"¹⁴ These works were to strongly influence Father Frowin who later would model his new community in America more on the archabbey at Beuron than on his own motherhouse at Engelberg.

The missionaries from Engelberg set sail for America from the French harbor at Le Havre on 9 May 1873 and arrived in New York on 20 May. From the time of his arrival at New York, Frowin Conrad faithfully kept a diary almost until his death in 1923. This diary which Frowin wrote almost totally in his diminutive "Gothic" German script is preserved in the Conception Abbey archives. From Frowin's entry of 7 November 1873 in which he relates progress made for his new colony at Conception we read,

On the same day on which we landed in New York, the Very Rev. Prior Fintan of St. Meinrad visited the place that God had destined for us. He was sent by his abbot to St. Joseph to investigate the situation At the time he met the Rev. Father Power, the parish priest of Conception, at the Bishop's house, who wished to hand over his house to the bishop . . . Fr. Fintan went with Fr. Power to inspect the place. His report to the abbot of St. Meinrad was so favorable that it left no doubt in the minds of Martin and myself, that this place which was under the special protection of the Immaculate Conception was the place that God in his mercy had destined for us.¹⁵

Father Fintan would remain in Missouri and would lay the cornerstone for the first modest wooden monastery building at Conception on 14 September 1873.

The two Fathers from Engelberg—Adelhelm and Frowin—would stay on at St. Meinrad Abbey until September. As a part of his acclimatization to America Frowin relates how

On August 3 Father Abbot Martin informed me that the bishop had asked for a priest to take care of a German parish in the capital city [Indianapolis] until the return of the pastor or until a new one could be appointed. He added that this would be a wonderful chance for me to get better acquainted with American ways and to practice my

English. The idea of exchanging the quiet of St. Meinrad with the noise of the city did not appeal to me at first, but I came to the conclusion that it was my duty to accept an offer so advantageous to us in several respects.¹⁶

Finally leaving Indiana for Missouri in September 1873, Fathers Frowin Conrad and Adelhelm Odermatt arrived in St. Louis on 15 September, which was the day after Father Fintan laid the cornerstone for the first monastery at Conception. Frowin and Adelhelm traveled on to northwest Missouri by way of St. Joseph and Maryville. Leaving Maryville by wagon at 7:00 A.M. on 18 September Frowin describes what he first saw when approaching Conception that evening:

On Sept. 18 Mr. Clever drove us to Conception, a distance [from Maryville] of 14 miles. When we were still seven miles away we could see the little church. The countryside, illuminated as it was by the evening sun, looked like a huge plateau from which no mountains can be seen because one is apparently so high above them. We arrived at 7 P.M. Construction on the monastery building has stopped completely because it is harvest time. We shall have a stately two-story building and we hope to take possession on St. Martin's day [Nov. 11].¹⁷

The two Fathers from Engelberg in Switzerland established a Benedictine colony named New Engelberg near the settlement of Conception and officially opened the monastery just before Christmas of 1873.¹⁸

The Monastic Colony Prospers. Before New Engelberg was raised to an abbey, Father Frowin launched an ambitious building program. To make his program of construction possible, he made great efforts to increase the monastic land holdings. Mention of generous donations of land by Father Power and the acquisition, sale, and disposition of other acreage in an effort to obtain contiguous holdings large enough to assure the economic survival of the monastic establishment recur in Frowin's diary entries from 1873-79.¹⁹ During that period, New Engelberg appears to have amassed land totaling 1,807 acres.²⁰

Frowin's first permanent construction of stone and brick was a new monastery. On 20 August 1878 Frowin wrote to Abbot Anselm at Engelberg about plans for construction at New Engelberg. Upon receipt of a letter on 14 January 1879 from Engelberg detailing steps for becoming an abbey, Frowin confides in his diary that most steps have already been taken. For this ambitious monastery construction project and others to come, Frowin developed a network of primarily German-speaking builders, artisans, and

painters which eventually extended from Missouri to cities in Illinois, Ohio, and Germany.

First fruits of planning with the architect Eckels of St. Joseph had reached Frowin at the monastery on Friday, 18 January 1878. The architect brought plans for the new stone monastery prepared from Frowin's sketches. Plans for construction moved forward rapidly. On 26 January of the same year, we learn from Frowin that

Today after High Mass, I explained to the people, both in English and in German, my reasons for drawing up a contract with them which provides for the addition of a farm to our monastery on which the monastery will be built. I also expressed my hopes that they would help, as much as possible, to haul the materials [The day before] Mr. Schaaf came and told me that there were plenty of beautiful stones . . . on the Platte River North, about 9 miles from the site of the buildings. [On 8 February Frowin] . . . visited with the architects Boettner and Eckels. After consulting with the Bishop, I gave them a plan proposed by Frater Maurus, for a brick building to be the beginning of a real monastery.²¹

In Frowin's diary we read both of the process and problems and of the successes and failures of finding clay, building kilns, obtaining fuel, and firing bricks at the monastery. Such matters are discussed intermittently from 19 February 1879 to 8 May 1880.

The extent of German settlement in the area and the extent of Frowin's—consciously or unconsciously—developed German network is also reflected by the names mentioned by Frowin in his diary. He relates on 23 March 1879 how, "about 900 loads of stones from Siebenaller's—about nine miles from here—would have to be hauled to the site." Two days later he tells that he "wrote to Mr. John Goenen of Damienville in Clinton County in Illinois . . ." making an offer to buy some of his adjacent acreage to round out the monastic property. On 21 April Frowin meets with architect Eckels, Father Adelhelm, Father Ignatius, and the Reverend Fleischlin to discuss construction plans.

Digging for the foundation of the new monastery began on 13 May 1879. The date of 6 April 1880²² saw "the solemn laying of the corner of the new monastery, the imparting of the Papal blessing by the Rev. Bishop J. J. Hogan. Father Francis Moening, the superior of the Franciscans in Chillicothe, had the English sermon and Father Linnenkamp the German sermon." From Chillicothe came a bricklayer, Bernard Albers and a stoneworker, J. J. Engelmann. A man named Pfeifer was another of the stoneworkers. The new monastery must have been completed toward year's end. Frowin "had appointed the seventh of January for our entrance [into the new monastery]

as the eighth anniversary of the resolution of the chapter in Engelberg which caused the establishment of this colony."²³

New Engelberg Colony Becomes New Engelberg Abbey. When the monastic colony of New Engelberg was officially raised to abbey status on 15 April 1881 with Father Frowin Conrad as its first abbot, the Swiss-American Congregation consisting of St. Meinrad's and New Engelberg was founded.²⁴ Instead of looking to his Swiss motherhouse, however, Abbot Frowin brought his new monastery under the organizational sway of reforms at the southwest German archabbey at Beuron on the Danube.

The Abbey Basilica. The century-old contours of Conception Abbey Basilica with its two square towers rising 180 feet into the heavens in the west are visible from thoroughfares that approach the monastery from north, east, and west (fig. 1). The new (1991) copper roof and the red of the brick walls are clearly visible above the horizon well over five miles before the pilgrim or guest arrives. Two miles to the northeast of Conception Abbey, a single light gray-brown square limestone tower locates the Benedictine sisters' convent and its Chapel of Perpetual Adoration at Clyde. Both German Neo-Romanesque-style churches and their accompanying complexes of monastic buildings are situated amidst rolling agricultural lands and, atop hills, tower above rural Nodaway County. These centers of Benedictine monasticism are located about fourteen miles southeast of Maryville in Missouri's northwest corner.

The present Abbey Basilica was preceded by wooden church structures located to its northwest on the site of the present monastic cemetery.²⁵ Construction of the new Abbey Basilica began on 2 November 1882 with the laying of the first stone of the foundation in the northwest tower.²⁶ Plans for the Basilica were drawn up by a monk, Brother Adrian Werwer, from the Franciscan priory at Chillicothe, Missouri. Brother Adrian planned and supervised the construction of many friaries throughout the Midwest and in California. In Missouri, Brother Adrian designed churches in Chillicothe and Conception. Churches in Indiana by Brother Adrian are in Indianapolis (Sacred Heart), Evansville (St. Anthony's), and St. Meinrad.²⁷ The Basilica of the Immaculate Conception was consecrated on 10 May 1891.

Architectural Models. Some similarities can be found between the style of the Conception Abbey Basilica and that of some Romanesque structures in or near Cologne (e.g., Holy Apostles, Cologne and Knechtsteden) and at Maria-Laach. More and closer architectural models for the Conception Abbey Basilica, however, are found on the Middle Rhine between the Lahn and Neckar rivers. The Conception Basilica's two-tower west façade with rose window shares common elements with the more elaborate façade of the cathedral at Limburg an der Lahn. St. Martin's Church in Worms was more comparable to the Conception building before World War II destruction (fig. 2). In both, vertical

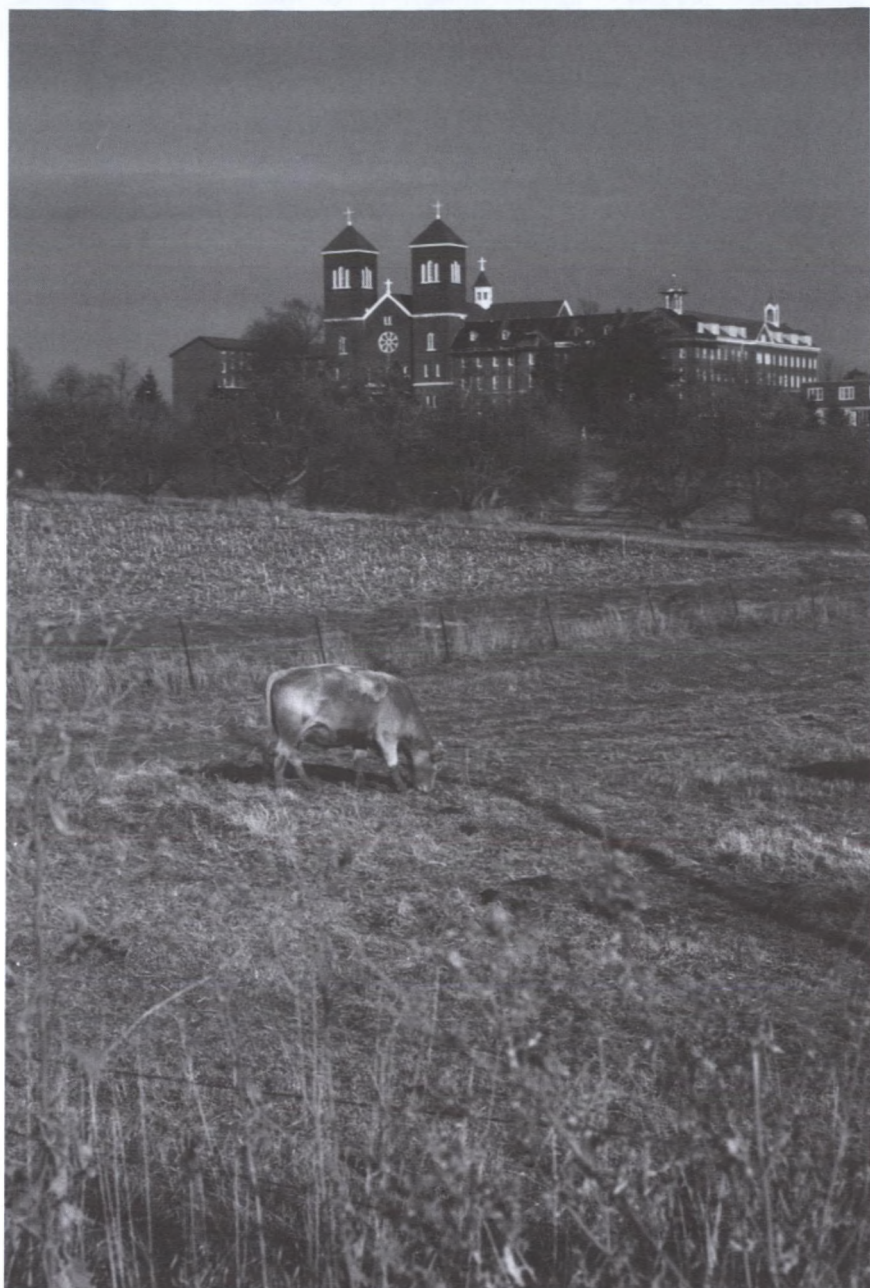


Figure 1. Conception Abbey Basilica and monastery (at right) from the southwest (photo: author, 1990).

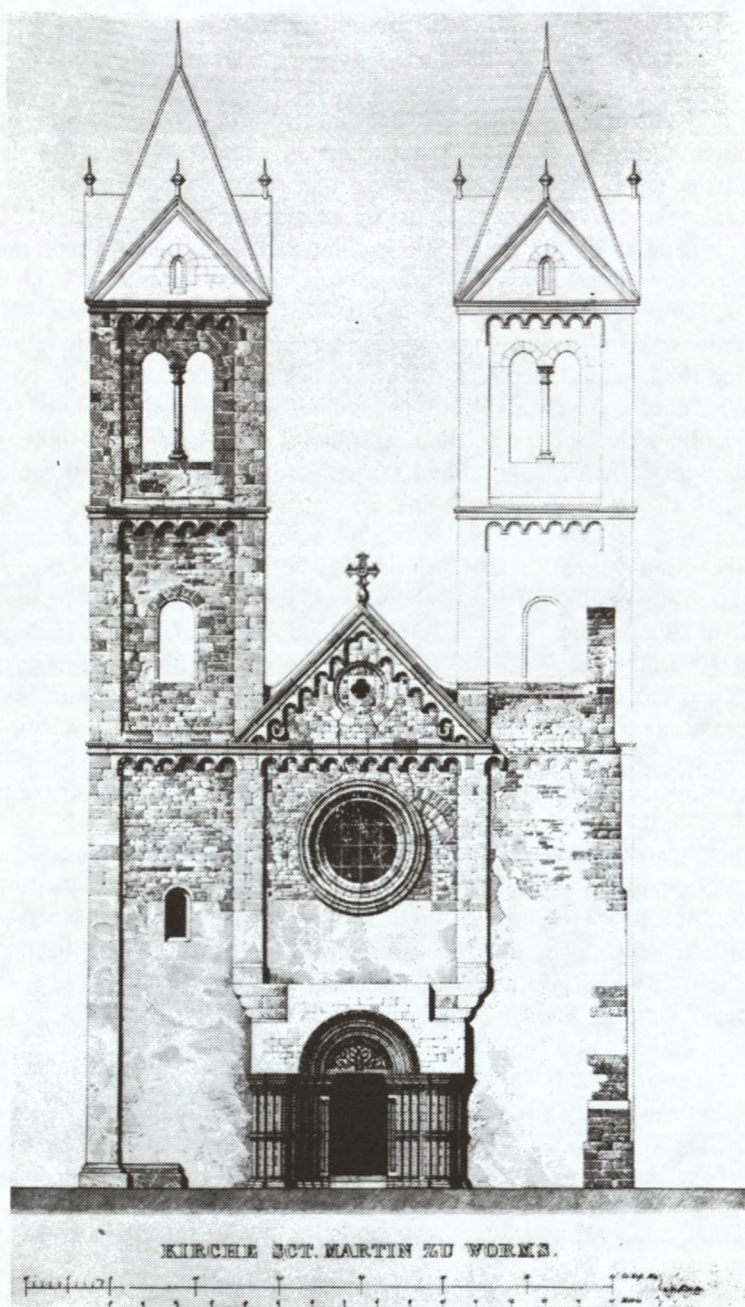


Figure 2. West facade of St. Martin's in Worms (after Ernst Gladbach, 1856).

bands mark the bay divisions on the outside walls of the nave and side aisles. These are also found in the abbey at Maria-Laach, as are a round main apse with three windows and rounded transept chapels.

In both elevation structure and architectural detail the interior of the Conception Abbey Basilica (fig. 3) shows marked similarity to St. Martin's at Worms from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (fig. 4) and a considerable family resemblance to the more elaborate interiors of the cathedrals at Mainz (1100-1239) and at Worms (1018-1181). All four Basilicas share an alternating support system with strong and weak piers of rectangular plan. A relatively simple molding instead of a capital marks the springing of the arches in the main arcades. Half-round responds ascend and support transverse arches separating the bays in the nave. Each nave bay is covered by a four-part rib vault. Whereas the nave wall of the Conception Basilica is unarticulated within each bay, the walls above the main arcades of both cathedrals show some articulation in form of either blind arches (Mainz) or horizontal moldings (Worms; cf. Bamberg, Eberbach, Speyer).

The Conception Murals. The interior of the Basilica, at the time of its consecration, was painted with a relatively modest scheme of ornamentation. The individual members of the architectural support system—the arches of the main arcades, the half-column responds and the transverse arches they support, and the vault ribs—were articulated by painted ornamental motifs. The large areas of wall and vault between them were painted a warm, light brown. This painted scheme was produced by F. H. Hefeles of Cincinnati, Ohio. Remnants of this original scheme are preserved above the organ pipes north of the last half-bay of the choir.

When scarcely two years old, the Basilica was severely damaged by a tornado. News of the devastation wrought on the new Basilica reached Abbot Frowin in Europe. He changed disaster into blessing, however, when plans were made to replace the tornado-damaged decoration by murals in the new Beuronese style which adorned leading Benedictine establishments such as the archabbey of Beuron, the Benedictine motherhouse at Monte Cassino, and the Emaus Monastery in Prague. Conception Abbey monks were trained in Beuron and young painter-monks from Beuron were also recruited to transfer the new Beuronese style to northwest Missouri. Damage from the tornado was soon repaired and the Abbey Basilica was decorated with Beuronese murals. These murals are better adapted to their architectural carrier than any of their Beuronese models in Europe and follow more closely the one-and-a-half-thousand-year-old tradition of arranging murals on the interior walls of Christian Basilicas.

St. Paul's Outside the Walls from the fourth century was an example of this mural tradition as are the tenth-century murals of St. George on the island of Reichenau. The degree to which painting decorates the Conception Abbey

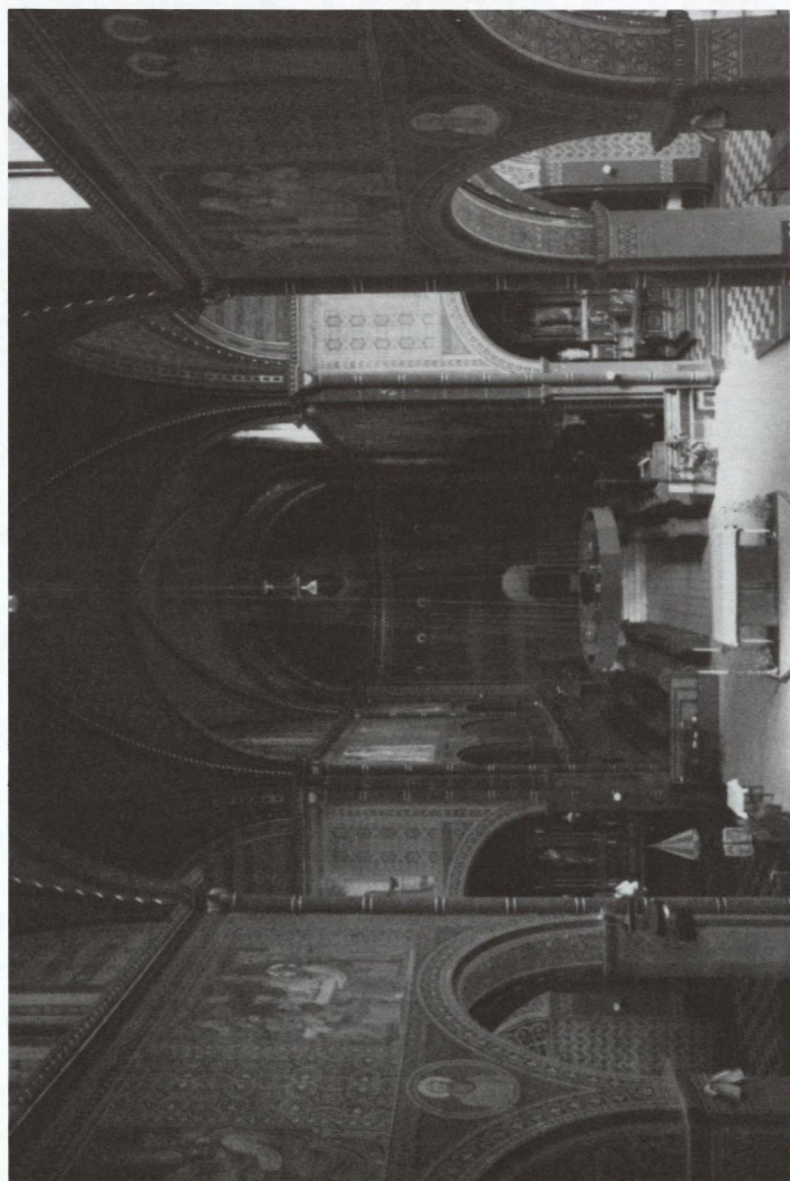


Figure 3. Conception Abbey Basilica nave from the west (photo: author, 1988).

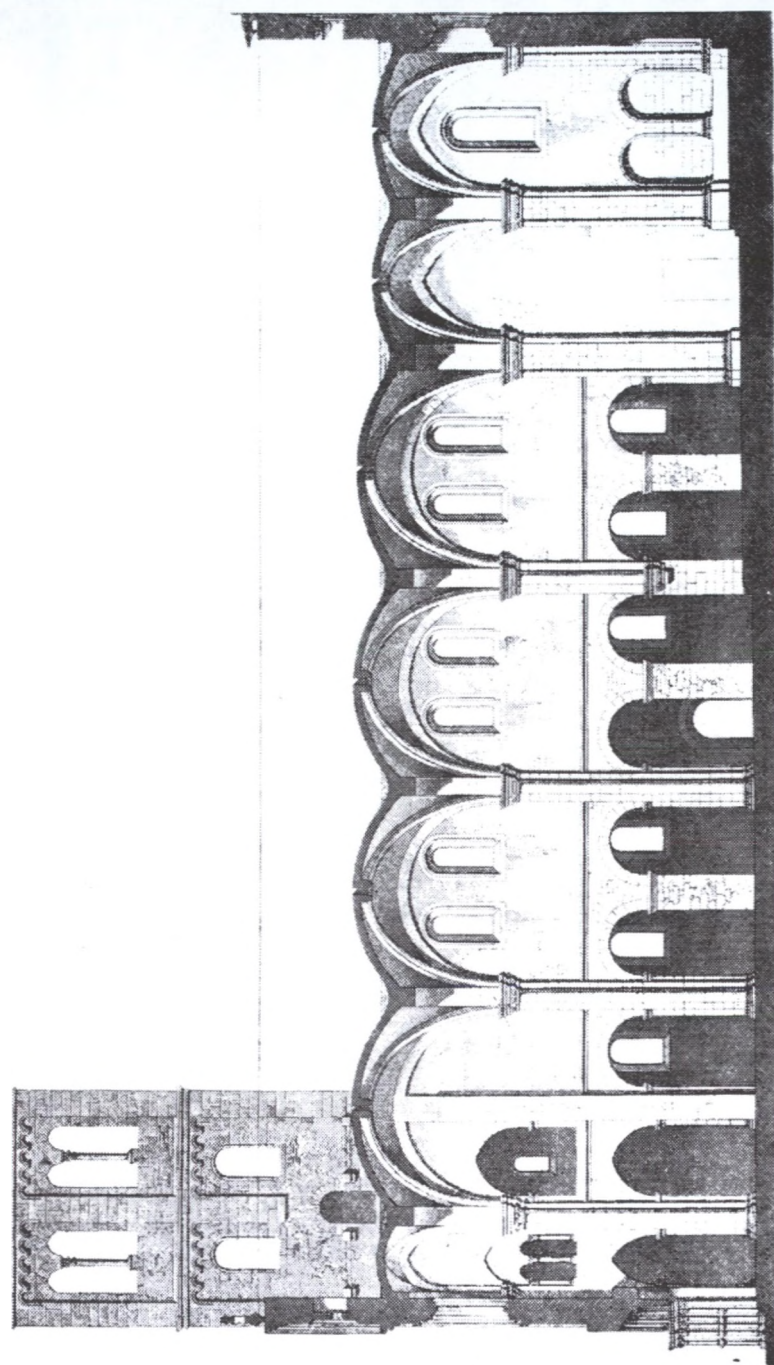


Figure 4. Nave elevation of St. Martin's in Worms from the southwest (after Ernst Wörner, 1887).

interior is also reminiscent of the situation in the motherhouse of the Franciscan order of Assisi.

Beuronese Style. The primary theoretical basis for the Beuronese style was formulated in a tract—*Zur Ästhetik der Beurer Schule*—in 1898 by Pater Desiderius (Peter) Lenz, a monk from Beuron and the main exponent of the style. Lenz and Pater Gabriel (Jakob) Wüger, who also took monastic vows at Beuron, were the first and most influential practitioners of Beuronese art.²⁸ They began putting their ideas for the renewal of Christian art into practice as early as 1868.²⁹ In an upsurge of Benedictine mural painting, programs in the Beuronese style were produced in Beuron,³⁰ Stuttgart,³¹ Prague,³² Bruges,³³ and at the grave site of St. Benedict in Monte Cassino.³⁴ Lenz created schematic drawings of figures designed according to geometric rules about which he theorized.³⁵ Lenz admitted, however, that the rules were not always consequently applied to real compositions.

The German monks who developed the Beuronese style consciously and expressly sought to create visual correspondences to the rhythms, restrained tonal colors, and pace of Gregorian plainsong³⁶ which was cultivated, particularly at Beuron and Conception Abbey, as the liturgical vehicle of Benedictine monasticism. The noble clarity of chant found visual expression in some of the formal features of the Beuronese style. Objects and actors included in Beuronese compositions are relatively few and the depth allotted for pictorial space is consciously limited. The Beuronese predilection for clear and readable compositions allowed arrangements of only a small number of participants on a narrow pictorial stage. Figures are arranged parallel to the picture plane and foreshortening is avoided. These characteristics of Beuronese style become particularly clear when scenes like the Presentation of the Virgin or the Marriage of the Virgin at Conception Abbey are compared to the respective scenes by the Italian Renaissance painters Tintoretto and Raphael. Linear and aerial perspective illusionism and non-essential genre details, which so fascinated Renaissance artists, play no role in Beuronese style.

Theoretical tracts speak of a hierarchy of forms and praise the art of the Egyptians and Greeks.³⁷ Whereas, stylistic similarities to art from ancient Egypt can be found in some variants of Beuronese style, they appear missing from the Conception murals—despite the inclusion of hieroglyphs and papyrus motifs. The treatment of the human body and facial features shows significant influence from classical art. Voluminous scoop folds like those in the drapery of the seated Christ in the Feast of Cana or St. Mary in the Visitation scene and portions of some drapery which seem to cling to the body of its wearer in these scenes reveal the classical-Greek derivation of the Beuronese models. The Beuronese murals also share with classical-Greek reliefs such features as economy of motifs and limited pictorial space.



Figure 5. View of Conception Abbey apse (photo: author, 1989).

The Iconographic Program. The iconography of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception is clearly orchestrated to lead the observer to the theological culmination of its program in the apse—the Immaculata (fig. 5). On the walls of the nave—anchored in wide ornamental frames—from the entrance in the west to the apse in the east, the tandem stories of St. Mary and Christ unfold in near chronological order. The first bay contains the Vision of David and Isaiah, the Birth of St. Mary, the Presentation of Mary in the Temple, and the Marriage of the Virgin. The sequence of pictures at Conception Abbey is directly related to that of the Beuronese murals from the Life of St. Mary in the Emaus Monastery in Prague.³⁸

An illustration of the Birth of St. Mary on a heavy card is preserved in the monastic archives at Conception Abbey. The nave mural of the Birth of St. Mary (fig. 6) and the card illustration of the same scene (fig. 7) appear at first glance to be identical. Closer scrutiny shows, however, that the square scene on the card has been expanded laterally on the wall painting. An inscription along the extreme lower edge of the card reads: "Vervielf. vorbehalten / Photographie und Verlag der Kunstschule von Beuron." The card's light border is smudged with a considerable amount of reddish and greenish paint. The condition of this card is comparable to that of a number of other cards in the abbey archives. Card illustrations are found for a majority of the scenes painted on the nave wall at Conception Abbey. A few of the cards with photographs of Beuronese wall paintings printed by the Beuron press even have, on their reverse side, the monogram stamp of the archabbey library at Beuron.

In the second bay of the Conception Abbey nave are the representations of the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, and the Adoration of the Magi. A card from the Conception Abbey archives illustrating the Nativity has had a grid pattern penciled onto it. This may provide insight into the method used to transfer the card illustrations to the nave wall at Conception Abbey. Scenes showing the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, the Flight into Egypt, Jesus Teaching in the Temple, and the Marriage of Cana are in the third bay. The open book held by the young Christ teaching in the temple bears an inscription which may suggest that the mother tongue of the painter was German not English. The page on the left contains a Latin inscription from the book of Isaiah. The right-hand page begins with an English text in which beseech is misspelled—"beseach." Below is an inscription in correct German.

Representations of Christ Carrying His Cross, the Crucifixion, the Deposition, and Pentecost are found in the first bay of the choir. The scene with Christ carrying the cross also contains evidence that suggests this composition was adapted especially for its position on the choir wall of the Conception Basilica. The cross-carrying Christ in the scene of the model from Prague has Christ moving from left to right. To make Christ walk toward instead of away from his crucifixion in the scene at Conception Abbey, the

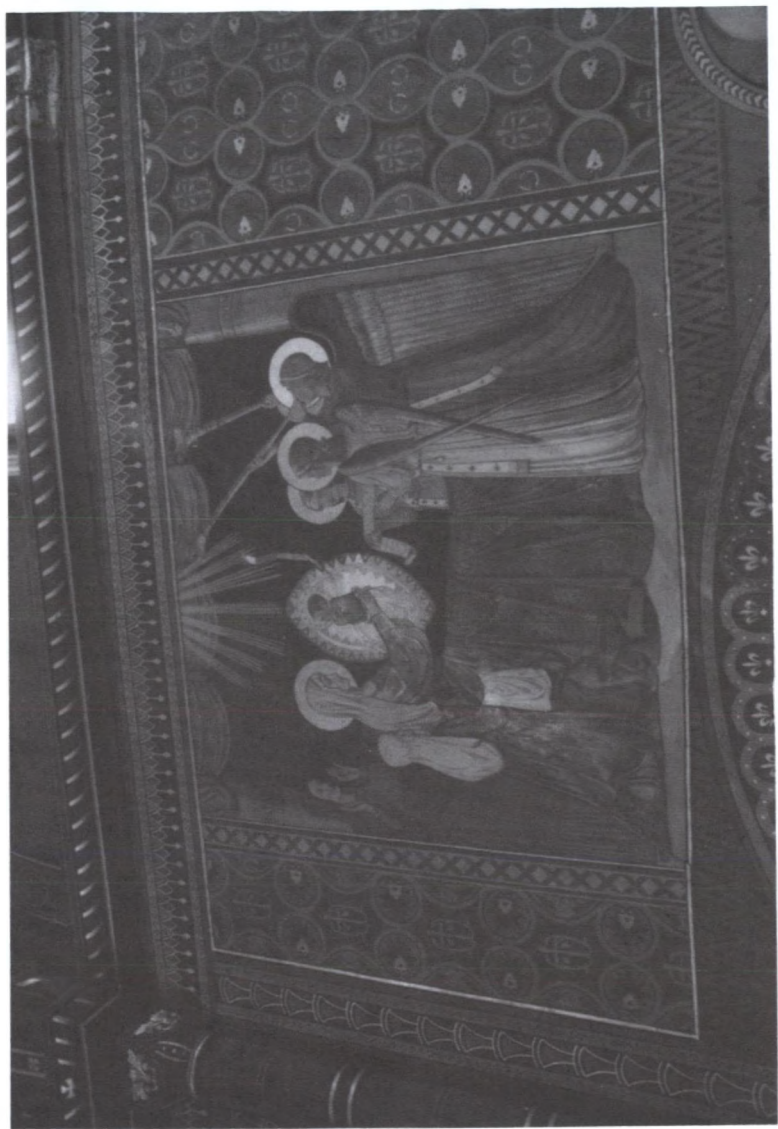


Figure 6. "The Birth of St. Mary," Beuronese mural on the south wall of the nave, Conception Abbey (photo: author, 1988).



Figure 7. "The Birth of St. Mary," Beuronese illustration on a heavy card preserved in the Conception Abbey archives (photo: author, 1989).

Prague composition was reversed. A post at the foot of Mary bears the initial "E" with a small cross above it and the date "1894" (fig. 8). The initial "E" may be a sign of Pater Lucas Etlin who held supervisory responsibility. This "E" with cross is similar to a reverse projection of the Beuronese monastic monogram. According to Abbot Frowin, Fathers Ildephonse and Hildebrand started work on this scene on 30 July 1894.³⁹

The scenes in the last half-bay at the east end of the choir show the Dormition of the Virgin and the Coronation of the Virgin. Signs of repair on the Coronation of the Virgin and the complete replacement of the Dormition and Deposition scenes by canvases attached to the wall evidence the work of Father Innocent Amhof done during the early 1950s—probably in the fall of 1953⁴⁰—when Father Innocent, according to the abbey necrology, was custodian of the church.⁴¹ The Immaculata and other figures in the apse are attributed to Father Lucas Etlin.⁴² Abbot Frowin tells us that the Immaculata was finished by November 1893. In addition to Fathers Ildephonse, Hildebrand, and Lucas, Abbot Frowin names two others—Ulrich Bregenzer, a postulant, and Brother Raphael—as painters in the Basilica.⁴³

A sense for local history and topography permeates the mural program. The topographic distribution of the scenes from the lives of SS. Scholastica and Benedict in the transept are oriented to the sites of the neighboring Benedictine sister-convent to the north and to the cloister of the brothers in the south. Beneath the large scenes in the north transept showing the last meeting of St. Scholastica with her brother St. Benedict and the Death of St. Scholastica are medallion busts of the SS. Gertrude and Hildegard, both Benedictine sisters. Scenes depicting the Death and Ascension of St. Benedict are in the south transept closest to the monastery of the brothers. Below these Benedict scenes are medallions of SS. Placidus and Maurus, who were with St. Benedict at Monte Cassino.

The abiding sense for topographic location in the decorative program is continued in the stained-glass transept windows at ground level. A window in the north transept beneath the St. Scholastica scenes was dedicated "By the Joung Ladies." Is the "J" in "Joung" not a Germanicism? Likewise, a colored window at ground level in the south transept is dedicated "By the Joung Men." These windows along with all others from the original glazing are scheduled for replacement "with metal-frame, thermal windows with slightly-tinted clear leaded glass."⁴⁴

Figures represented as medallion-busts in the main arcade of the nave make historical connections and set up topographical relationships significant for Conception Abbey. St. Patrick was the patron saint of the Irish who established the original colony at Conception. His bust is on the same side as the former St. Patrick altar in the north transept. Old photographs in the abbey archives document this condition when the number of altars in the transept was greater. St. Boniface on the south nave wall is the counterpart for the German community. A St. Boniface altar was originally located in the



Figure 8. Deatail of a milestone from "Christ Carrying the Cross," mural on the south wall of the choir, Conception Abbey (photo: author, 1989).



Figure 9. Ornament on the main arcade including an uncial "M" for Maria, Conception Abbey (photo: author, 1989).

south transept. The medallion-bust of the Irish St. Columba reminds us of the dedication of the original church of the Conception colony to him. Beatus Frowin (1147-78) was an abbot at Engelberg.⁴⁵ His medallion-bust is also an obvious reference to Frowin Conrad, the first abbot of Conception. A medallion-bust on the south wall of the first bay is traditionally called St. Philip and associated by members of the monastic community with Philip, the second abbot of Conception.⁴⁶ Across from him, also in the first bay, is a medallion-bust identified by inscription as St. Stephen. Stephen was the name of the third abbot at Conception. On the north and south walls of the choir, above the choir stalls, are two medallion figures whose attributes clearly identify them as St. Gregory in the north and King David in the south. Both are obvious references to the chant and instrumental music focused—for the first century—in this area of the Basilica.⁴⁷

The painted ornamentation articulating the architectural support system and mural frames also contributes to the prevailing effort to use symbols and to establish hierarchical relationships through placement. The golden letter "M's," in uncial script, at main arcade level (fig. 9) stand for Maria as do further golden uncial "M's" on a banner held by an angel in the north transept vault (fig. 10) and an "M" on a similar tablet pictured on a small panel painting by Father Ildephonse. The mural frames, displaying figure-ground reversal tendencies, can be cross patterns as can be the fleur-de-lis in the main arcades. Crosses of gold on the capitals which support the transverse arches glow with particular effectiveness in the appearing and disappearing daylight at vigils and vespers. Renewal plans foresee elimination of the Maria monograms along with most of the cross patterns when the wall responds and their capitals are removed.⁴⁸

In vaults above the nave, transept, and choir, we still find angels—the four evangelist symbols occupy the half-bay immediately before the apse. The number of angels exceeds thirty (fig. 11). In keeping with a nearly two-thousand-year tradition of Christian text and pictorial interpretation, the Conception angels can be seen and interpreted on several different levels. Located in the starry blue vaults of the Basilica—the stars are actually crosses of gold—angels are the quite expected occupants of the heavenly realm. The angels also remind us of Conception Abbey's first title, New Engelberg (New Mount Angel), and its connection to the motherhouse in Engelberg, Switzerland. Finally, the angels make visible certain concepts addressed by St. Benedict in the nineteenth chapter of his *Rule*.

This chapter of *St. Benedict's Rule for Monasteries* is "on the Manner of Saying the Divine Office." Benedict states here:

We believe that the divine presence is everywhere and that "the eyes of the Lord are looking on the good and the evil in every place" [Proverbs 15:3]. But we should believe this especially without any

doubt when we are assisting at the Work of God. To that end let us be mindful always of the Prophet's words, "Serve the Lord in fear" [Psalms 2:11] and again "Sing praises wisely" [Psalms 46:8] and "In the sight of the Angels I will sing praise to You" [Psalms 137:1]. Let us therefore consider how we ought to conduct ourselves in the sight of the Godhead and of His Angels, and let us take part in the psalmody in such a way that our mind may be in harmony with our voice.

Current plans for the renewal of the Conception Abbey Basilica also foresee the elimination of all medallion angels in the course of the complete removal of the vaults. This decision appears to be based upon models for the Basilica renewal chosen from early Christian examples (fourth and fifth century A.D.), Romanesque basilicas of Italian provenance, or flat-ceiling Romanesque Basilicas in Germany from the time of the Saxon and Salic emperors and earlier (e.g., Reichenau, St. George, 9th-10th c.; Hildesheim, St. Michael, 1001-31; first design of Speyer Cathedral, ca. 1030) or from modest provincial buildings (e.g., Faurndau, St. Mary, ca. 1220-30; San Piero a Grado, 12th-13th c.). None of these are models followed by the designer of the original Conception Basilica.

Semicircular vaults—as opposed to a flat or open truss ceiling—are characteristic for the Conception models and are also a quintessential element in German high-Romanesque (groin vault) and late-Romanesque (rib vault) architecture. Brother Adrian Werwer designed the Conception Abbey Basilica in keeping with German late-Romanesque models whereby the exterior and interior of the building interact and reflect the forms of the other. The Conception Basilica, following its historic models, has vertical bands on the exterior of the side aisle and clerestory walls. These correspond to the responds and the springing of the vaults on the interior. The Conception Basilica exemplifies—in the form designed by Brother Adrian—historic accuracy and harmonious unity of interior and exterior forms.

Diverging from the Abbey Basilica's historic models, the renewal committee has chosen a plan whereby "The CEILING [sic] will be removed to expose the trusses and give it more consonance with the exterior roof line."⁴⁹

Epilogue. The entire fabric of the murals at Conception Abbey was woven from diverse strands of Biblical history, the history of the Benedictine order, and the history of the abbey at Conception, Missouri. The murals are visual expressions of perpetual prayers; they were created to fulfill this contemplative function and joined together in a seamless fabric of prayers and work.⁵⁰ They are, as they have been called, "Images of Faith."⁵¹ Parts of this complex fabric of architecture, murals, and ornamentation—reflecting the communal life and efforts of brethren from Conception Abbey's first century—may not long survive the Basilica's centennial celebration, but rather be rent asunder. A



Figure 10. Medallion angel holding a banner with Maria monogram, north transept vault, Conception Abbey (photo: author, 1990).



Figure 11. Angel holding scroll with rosary text, crossing vault, Conception Abbey (photo: author, 1990).

decision on the fate of the Basilica interior was announced shortly before 10 May 1991—the centennial of the Abbey Basilica's consecration.⁵² According to renewal plans, the Conception community expects to restore⁵³ what remains from the original Basilica interior after the floor levels are changed, the choir stalls removed, the side aisle and transept walls slipcovered, the half-column wall responds, transverse arches, and ribs dismantled, all original glazing replaced, and the vaults of the side aisles, transept, nave, and choir demolished.⁵⁴ If the proponents carry out these Basilica renewal plans, the abbey's "step into the future"⁵⁵ will seal the fate of the Basilica's interior. One of America's prime examples of medievalism—with its uniquely extensive and unified program of architecture and mural painting in the Beuronese style—will be lost.

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Notes

¹ [Pater Placidus Schmidt], *Church Guide for the Members of the Immaculate Conception Parish* (Conception, MO: Printing Office of Conception Abbey, 1897), 7.

² Edward Eugene Malone, *Conception: A History of the First Century of the Conception Colony 1858-1958; A History of the First Century of Conception Abbey 1873-1973; A History of New Engelberg College, Conception College, and the Immaculate Conception Seminary 1886-1971* (Omaha, NE: Interstate Printing Co., 1971), 32.

³ Dorothy J. Caldwell, ed., "Nodaway County, Conception," *Missouri Historic Sites Catalogue* (Columbia, MO: The State Historical Society of Missouri, 1963), 115-16.

⁴ Malone, *Conception*, 17-19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 47ff.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Oliver Leonard Kapsner, *A Benedictine Bibliography: An Author-Subject Union List. Compiled for the Library Science Section for the American Benedictine Academy* (Collegeville, MN: St. John's Abbey Press, 1962), 1:173-74; 2:210.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:229.

¹¹ Malone, *Conception*, 41.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 42ff.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

¹⁵ Abbot Frowin Conrad, *Diary*, excerpts compiled by Brother Samuel Russell (Conception Abbey, MO: Conception Abbey, 1989), 1.

¹⁶ Malone, *Conception*, 64.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 68; Pater Placidus Schmidt, *Memoirs of an Old Country Pastor Concerning His Pastorate at Conception, Missouri* (Cottonwood, ID: St. Gertrude's Press, 1922), 17; [Pater Placidus Schmidt], *Church Guide for the Members of the Immaculate Conception Parish*, 11-12; Pater Placidus Schmidt, *Church Guide for the Members of the Immaculate Conception Parish* (St. Louis: C. B. Woodward Company, 1891), 12.

- ¹⁹ Abbot Frowin Conrad, *Diary*.
- ²⁰ Malone, *Conception*, 90.
- ²¹ Abbot Frowin Conrad, *Diary*.
- ²² *Ibid.*; cf. Malone, *Conception*, 127—for date of 16 April 1880.
- ²³ Abbot Frowin Conrad, *Diary*, 35.
- ²⁴ Malone, *Conception*, 115f.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.
- ²⁶ Abbot Frowin Conrad, *Diary*; [Pater Placidus Schmidt], *Church Guide for the Members of the Immaculate Conception Parish*, 14; Malone, *Conception*, 129—for a date of 22 November 1882.
- ²⁷ Malone, *Conception*, 128-30, 134.
- ²⁸ Harald Siebenmorgen, *Die Anfänge der "Beuroner Kunstschule": Peter Lenz und Jakob Wüger 1850-1875: Ein Beitrag zur Genese der Formabstraktion in der Moderne*, Bodensee-Bibliothek, vol. 27 (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 1983).
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 131ff; Pater Ansgar Dreher, "Zur Beuroner Kunst," *Beuron 1863-1963: Festschrift zum hundertjährigen Bestehen der Erzabtei St. Martin* (Beuron: Beuroner Kunstverlag, 1963), 361ff.
- ³⁰ Siebenmorgen, *Die Anfänge der "Beuroner Kunstschule"*; *A Benedictine Bibliography* 1:76-77, 2:190-91.
- ³¹ Paul Keppler, *Die XIV Stationen des Heiligen Kreuzweges: Nach Compositionen der Malerschule des Klosters Beuron* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder'sche Verlagshandlung, 1891).
- ³² *Marienleben: Nach den Original-Kartons der Malerschule von Beuron* (M.-Gladbach: B. Kühlen Kunst- und Verlagsanstalt, 1895).
- ³³ Kapsner, *A Benedictine Bibliography*, 2:192.
- ³⁴ Cornelius Kriel, *Leben und Regel des Heiligen Vaters Benediktus* (Beuron/Hohenzollern: Beuroner Kunstverlag, 1929); cf. Kapsner, *A Benedictine Bibliography* 1:399-401, 2:233-37.
- ³⁵ Siebenmorgen, *Die Anfänge der "Beuroner Kunstschule"*, 77-78; Josef Kreitmaier, *Beuroner Kunst: Eine Ausdrucksform der christlichen Mystik* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder and Co. Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1921), 45-56, Tafel 3; Pater Desiderius Lenz, *Zur Ästhetik der Beuroner Schule*, *Schriften der Leo-Gesellschaft*, no. 11 (Wien: 1898), 10-12.
- ³⁶ Kreitmaier, *Beuroner Kunst*, 61.
- ³⁷ Lenz, *Ästhetik der Beuroner Schule*; Kreitmaier, *Beuroner Kunst*; Siebenmorgen, *Die Anfänge der "Beuroner Kunstschule"*.
- ³⁸ *Marienleben*.
- ³⁹ Abbot Frowin Conrad, *Diary*.
- ⁴⁰ Fr. Kenneth Reichert, interview by author, tape recording, Conception Abbey, Missouri, 8 March 1989.
- ⁴¹ Cf. the entry under Fr. Innocent Amhof in the Conception Abbey Necrology which is preserved in the abbey archives.
- ⁴² For a discussion of the iconography, cf. Br. Thomas Sullivan, *Iconographic Schemes: Basilica of the Immaculate Conception* (Conception, MO: Conception Abbey, ca. 1985), pamphlet.
- ⁴³ Abbot Frowin Conrad, *Diary*, 53; an art-historical monograph on the Conception Abbey murals and painters is in preparation by the author.
- ⁴⁴ Fr. Xavier Nacke, "The Renewal of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception," *Tower Topics* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 3-7, esp. 6.
- ⁴⁵ Kapsner, *A Benedictine Bibliography* 1:195, 2:332.
- ⁴⁶ Fr. Walter Heeney, interview by author, tape recording, Conception Abbey, Missouri, 3 March 1989.
- ⁴⁷ In the course of "Basilica renewal" the monastic choir and a new organ will be placed in the south transept; cf. Br. Samuel Russell, "Basilica Renewal," *Tower Topics* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 10-13, esp., plan on 11; "FURNISHINGS [sic] such as the choir stalls, pews, altar, and chairs will be constructed new"; cf. Nacke, "The Renewal of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception," 6.

⁴⁸ Cf. Nacke, "The Renewal of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception," 7, for a conceptual view of the Basilica interior after it has been "renewed."

⁴⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁰ Kreitmaier, *Beuronner Kunst*, 71.

⁵¹ Br. Thomas Sullivan, *Images of Faith: Conception Abbey, Conception, Missouri*, (St. Louis: The Missouri Committee for the Humanities, Inc., ca. 1985), pamphlet.

⁵² Nacke, "The Renewal of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception," 3-7.

⁵³ Cf. "Christy Cunningham Adams: Conservator," *Tower Topics* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 8-9.

⁵⁴ Br. Samuel Russell, "Basilica Renewal," *Tower Topics* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 10-13; "Basilica Renewal Design Narrative" (Conception, MO: Conception Abbey, 2 October 1989), single sheet; "Basilica Renewal Planning Design Narrative Commentary" (Conception, MO: Conception Abbey, 2 November 1989), four sheets; "Capital Campaign," *Tower Topics* 3, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 11; "The Renewal of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception" (Conception, MO: Conception Abbey, 1990), pamphlet; Nacke, "The Renewal of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception".

⁵⁵ "Conception Abbey announces first-ever Capital Campaign—step into the future," *Tower Topics* 3, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 3-7; "step into the future" (Conception Abbey, Conception, MO, ca. 1989), pamphlet.

