

Stations of the Cross at Most Blessed Sacrament

A report of the Most Blessed Sacrament Church Museum Committee

Note: As part of an ongoing study of the major interior art works of the Church, the Museum Committee originally issued this report on March 22, 2006. It was updated on October 31, 2006 and again on April 1, 2017 to incorporate additional information resulting from ongoing research.

Origins of the Stations

As indicated by a plaque on Station 1, The Stations of the Cross were donated to the church by John and Daniel Kemp in 1886. The donation of the Stations is later mentioned in an 1898 newspaper article¹ describing the accomplishments of Father Mistelli upon the occasion of his departure as pastor of Most Blessed Sacrament parish. The article indicates that the Kemp brothers of Landis Store, made several contributions to the development of the church and school during Father Mistelli's pastorate and further states:

"They had previously given the stations in the church, costing \$400."

The stations were acquired during the pastorate of Father John Meurer S.J. (pastor 1882-1889), predecessor of Father Mistelli. A review of Father Meurer's parish account book² indicates that the Stations were purchased during a period when significant renovations were being made in the church. The expense items indicate that the primary artist during these renovations was George Seiling, a well-known artist with a studio in Reading. There were six entries in the account book, between 1886 and 1888, for payments to "Mr. Seiling" for decorating the church totaling \$747.50.

Recorded expenses specified for the Stations of the Cross include:

- July 12, 1886 "Freight for Stations" \$2.60
- September 20, 1886 "Wire and Hooks for Stations" \$1.08
- November 16, 1886 for "Stations of the Cross" \$336.05

An income item of \$336.00 was recorded on March 12, 1887 for "Stations of the Cross".

Over the years, the unsigned paintings of the Stations have been attributed to various artists including the Dutch Masters and more recently to Berthold Imhoff. Research has confirmed that the Stations are oil painted copies of Joseph Führich's life size frescoes originally painted in the St. John Nepomucene Church in Vienna, Austria³. Führich's monumental work (95 x 73 inches) painted from 1844 to 1846 became so admired and so well known that copies of the Stations appear in numerous churches throughout Europe. It is likely that many churches in the United States also have copies of the

Führich stations. Locally the Stations of the Cross at St. Paul's church in Reading are also oil painted copies of Führich's work.

In the photos below striking similarities can be seen between the copies of the Most Blessed Sacrament and St. Paul's Stations, and the originals at St. John Nepomucene's Church in Vienna. Similar results were obtained in comparison with available photos of Stations in several European churches. Minor changes in such things as garment colors, closed versus open toe shoes, etc. can be seen from copy to copy. The copy size also dictates the background detail that is included. For example, on the illustrated Fifth Station the smaller the size, the fewer the number of soldiers that can be seen in the background on the right.

Most Blessed Sacrament

24 x 35 inches



St. Paul's

31 x 42 inches



Führich – St. John

95 x 73 inches



In 2001, a set of full-sized drawings used in the original design and execution of the Stations at St. John Nepomucene Church in Vienna was donated by Führich's family to the Albertina Museum in Vienna. The Most Blessed Sacrament Museum Committee acquired a copy of the book published as a catalogue of the drawings when they were placed on exhibition at the Albertina⁴. In addition to the photos of each of the drawings, the book provides an explanation of Führich's inspiration along with the symbolism used to depict each Station.

The charcoal drawings offer an excellent opportunity to review and compare the details of the Most Blessed Sacrament copies with the originals.

Acquisition of Führich Copies

The precise details of the acquisition of the Führich copies have not yet been confirmed. Oil painted copies of the Führich Stations were readily available in 1886 when the Most Blessed Sacrament Stations were acquired. One such source was through catalogues whose availability was advertised in common publications of the time such as the "Catholic Standard" newspaper and the "Official Catholic Directory". Father Meurer would have clearly been aware of this source material as one item in his account book was for the purchase of the "Catholic Directory". He likely had copies of the catalogues as well since other items in the church can be confirmed as catalogue purchases.

One of the best-known source catalogues was the Benziger Brother's Catalogue of Church Ornaments, which contains a wide array of items for church and school. The Library of Congress has seven Benziger Catalogues spanning the years 1873 to 1888. In a review of these catalogues, Saul Zalesch⁵ writes:

"In 1873 Benziger sold two sets of painted stations: one copied Deschwanden and the other, Joseph Führich. Deschwanden's, which Benziger probably had been selling longer, came in four sizes. The smallest, measuring twenty-nine by twenty-one inches, cost between \$110 and \$140, and the largest, forty-eight by thirty-six inches, between \$235 and \$300. Führich's paintings came in two basic sizes: forty-two by thirty inches, which cost between \$235 and \$250, and forty-eight by thirty-six inches, which sold for \$280 to \$300.

In 1879 Benziger first illustrated some of the stations of the cross. Its 1881 catalogue stated that over one hundred churches had purchased its stations. In 1885 Benziger provided more information about the stations, including numerous illustrations. Deschwanden's sets were known for "their exquisite coloring and simple, faith-inspiring delineation, the most popular extant." Führich's stations, "though equally rich in color, are, from their more elaborate groupings, better adapted to the extra-large sizes." In its later catalogues, Benziger provided an unprecedented number of illustrations of stations of the cross, but unfortunately did not specify the artist. These illustrations were probably meant to show off Benziger's extensive selection of fancy frames for the stations."

The 1889-90⁶ Benzinger catalogue offers oil painted Stations copied after Deschwanden, Führich and Brother Athanase. The Führich stations were offered in 5 sizes by this time including 35 x 25 and 42 x 30 inches, essentially the same sizes as the Most Blessed Sacrament and St. Paul's Stations.

Frame No. 27 (illustrated at right) from a photocopy of the 1889-90 catalogue is very similar in most of its details (except for the top ornamentation around the cross) to the frames of the Most Blessed Sacrament Stations, which are believed to be the original frames. The catalogue cost of the Führich prints in frame no. 27 is \$374 (compared to the \$336.05 expense recorded in Father Meurer's account book and the \$400 cost reported in the newspaper account of the Kemp Brothers donation).

The current frames of the St. Paul's Stations are not original and are believed to be the work of local craftsmen. Earlier photos of the interior of St. Paul's church show two additional frame styles both of which are similar in design to those found in Benzinger Brother's catalogues.

In Father Meurer's account books, most expense entries simply identify the item alone and not its source (e.g. "Paid for Bl. V. Mary & St. Joseph statues", "Angels with Candelabra", "Picture frames", etc.). However, there are several entries for books which seem to be identifying the source as the entries read "Books / Benziger". Another indicates "Books / Murphy".



Frame No. 27.

Heavy solid black teakwood, Gothic style, carved in extra rich style, rich gilt ornaments' gilt inscription and numbers.

PRICES FOR COMPLETE SETS, INCLUDING FRAMES:

OIL PAINTINGS.

25½	inches high by	16½	inches wide,	after	Deschwanden,	\$266.00
25½	"	16½	"	"	Bro. Athanase,	287.00
29	"	21	"	"	Deschwanden,	320.00
35	"	25	"	"	Deschwanden,	374.00
35	"	25	"	"	Führich,	374.00
35	"	25	"	"	Bro. Athanase,	423.00
42	"	30	"	"	Deschwanden,	473.00
42	"	30	"	"	Führich,	524.00
48	"	36	"	"	Deschwanden,	560.00
48	"	36	"	"	Führich,	613.00
62	"	42	"	"	Führich,	985.00

Available Catalogue Sources

Oil painted copies of well-known religious paintings were available from several sources. In his review of the Religious Art of the Benziger Brothers, Saul Zalesch lists the companies of “Fr. Pustet” and “I. Donnelly” as Benziger rivals. The Catholic Art Society of America also advertised their oil painted copies.

Fr. Pustet & Co. advertised itself as a publisher, bookseller and importer of Church Ornaments. Their advertisements also indicated that they were the sole agents for “Statues of the celebrated Mayr’s Artistic Institute in Munich (Bavaria)”.

A June 2, 1887 entry in Father Meurer’s account book states: “Paid for Bl. V. Mary & St. Joseph statues \$187.20.” These statues are believed to be the same statues that are on the side altars today. Embossed on the base of both statues is the manufacturers name – “Mayer and Co Munich.” Mayer’s “Institute of Christian Art” also provided oil painted copies of well-known religious paintings.

The Imhoff Connection

The 1886 Führich Stations blend very nicely with the 1910⁷ Berthold Imhoff paintings in Most Blessed Sacrament church in style, color and composition. The work of both artists was strongly influenced by the Nazarene movement in religious art. They both studied the Nazarene style, Führich directly as a member of the Nazarenes under Overbeck in Rome in 1837, and Imhoff much later at the Art Academy of Dusseldorf in 1898.

The original conclusion that the Stations at Most Blessed Sacrament and at St. Paul’s was the work of Imhoff was made by Dr. Helfried Seliger, Professor of German Studies at the University of Toronto. Dr. Seliger reviewed the work of Imhoff in Pennsylvania visiting churches decorated by Imhoff throughout the state in 1990 and again in 1994⁸. His notes on Most Blessed Sacrament include:

“The 14 stations of the cross by Imhoff are being cleaned and repainted. This is the reason why two of them were missing. The originals had become were (sic) very dark and dry. Were afraid of losing them.”

Dr. Seliger’s notes on St. Paul’s include the following:

“...along both sides of the knave there are 14 original paintings on canvas, depicting the stations of the cross, ca. 3 by 6 ft. and framed in wood. The motifs are those of the famous German artist Julius Führich with whose work Imhoff was thoroughly familiar. They are by Imhoff but are unsigned. The staff confirmed that these are the originals from the early 1900's.”

Berthold Imhoff was born in Mannheim Germany in 1868⁹. He made several trips to America beginning in 1892 before immigrating in 1900 and settling in Reading. Imhoff had a studio in Reading from 1900 to 1914. In 1914, he moved to Saskatchewan, Canada. Imhoff was Catholic and while living in Reading his home parish was St. Paul's.

Imhoff's frescoes at St. Paul's church in Reading were completed in 1908, and his frescoes at Most Blessed Sacrament Church in 1910. As indicated previously, the principal artist for the Most Blessed Sacrament church painting that occurred at the time the Stations were acquired was George Seiling. Seiling was also the principal artist for St. Paul's Church both in 1861 when the church was built and again in 1885 when major renovations were made there. Framed images of the Stations of the Cross of the same approximate size and appearance (except for the frames) as the Stations of today are clearly visible in an 1890 interior photo of St. Paul's Church¹⁰. While the frames in this 1890 photo are like those found in the Benziger catalogs, there is insufficient detail in these photos to positively confirm that they are copies of Führich's Stations. However, it is clear from the 1890 photo, that the Stations of the Cross at St. Paul's church were framed images prior to Imhoff's 1908 painting of the church.

Conclusions

The Stations of the Cross paintings at Most Blessed Sacrament and at St. Paul's are copies of the Joseph Führich composition at St. John Nepomucene Church in Vienna. The artist who made the copies remains unknown.

When Dr. Seliger drew his conclusions that Berthold Imhoff painted the Stations at Most Blessed Sacrament and at St. Paul's, much of the information presented here was not available to him. As we now know:

- the Most Blessed Sacrament Stations were acquired in 1886 during a period of significant renovations to the church interior.
- George Seiling was the principal artist during these renovations.
- Berthold Imhoff was 18 years old in 1886 and first came to America in 1892. Imhoff was the principal artist during renovations at Most Blessed Sacrament in 1910.

Additionally, Imhoff had his own composition of the Stations of the Cross. **It is highly unlikely that Imhoff was the artist for the unsigned oil painted copies of Joseph Führich's well known Stations of the Cross at Most Blessed Sacrament.** Imhoff would surely have been capable of duplicating Führich's work, even at age 18.

It is likewise unlikely that the Stations of the Cross at St. Paul's Church in Reading were copied by Imhoff. While it is not known when St. Paul's acquired their copies of the stations, early photos of the church interior suggest that they were likely acquired either on the initial building of the church in 1861 or during the renovations of 1885, well before Imhoff came to America,

George Seiling was the principal artist during all the indicated renovation work at both Most Blessed Sacrament and at St. Paul's. He would likely have been involved in the acquisition of the Stations at both churches. **If the Stations were copied locally, the artist would have more likely been Seiling, not Imhoff.** However, the catalogue availability of quality oil painted copies of Stations of the Cross would likely have been a factor in the decision of how to acquire the art work. Presumably catalogue purchase would have been less expensive than a commissioned work.

The Stations of the Cross at Most Blessed Sacrament Church are most likely catalogue purchases of Führich copies rather than commissioned works. It is likely that the same is also the case at St. Paul's.

The Most Blessed Sacrament Museum Committee

Ron Thren
April 2, 2017

Background Information

Station Details

The description of the scenes that accompanies the Albertina-published original drawings of the Stations provides significant detail about the figures that appear in each scene, the biblical or traditional motivation of the composition as well as the symbolism used in the composition.

The lion faces that appear throughout the Most Blessed Sacrament Church Stations are



likely symbolic of Roman authority. They appear on the soldier's footwear, headwear, etc. They are part of Führich's 1844 composition for the Vienna stations as can be seen in drawings illustrated here. They can also be found in an earlier composition of the Stations that Führich painted in Prague in 1834.

In this enlargement of a section of the Führich drawing for Station I (left), lion faces on the soldier's footwear to the left of the scene are readily visible on both the drawing and the Most Blessed Sacrament Church

Stations. While less-visible, the left foot of the same soldier can be seen in profile confirming the face as that of a lion. Note also the lion face on Pilate's chair in the upper right hand corner of the enlargement. Not visible in the Station 1 photo above nor in the Most Blessed Sacrament Church painting, one of the attendants behind Pilate wears the pelt and lion's head over his head like that of the soldier in Station 5 illustrated later.

Footwear faces are also visible in Station 6 and again in Station 7 of both the original drawings and the Most Blessed Sacrament Church Stations as illustrated by the following enlargements:



The face on the footwear in Station 7 (right) appears more human like than the Station 1 and Station 6 (left) faces, again in both the original drawings and the Most Blessed Sacrament Church Stations.



There are several other similar occurrences of faces in the Stations including those in Station 3 and 5 illustrated below. While these differ somewhat from the footwear faces, their presence in the Stations appears to have similar significance.



The arm of the soldier from the top background of Station 3 (left) contains a face like those that appear on the boots. In Station 5 (right) the soldier from the top background wears the head and pelt of a lion over his head and shoulders. Unlike



the other faces this one appears more a part of the apparel rather than incorporated in the boot or sleeve.

Joseph Führich¹¹

Führich was born February 9, 1800 in Kratzau, North Bohemia and died March 13, 1876 in Vienna, Austria.

Joseph Führich received his initial art training in the workshop of his father, Wenzel Führich (1768-1836), a painter, gilder and mason. In 1819, Joseph received public acclaim with two paintings at an art exhibition in Prague. With that, he was admitted to the Prague Academy in 1819 where he received his training from director Joseph Bergler under the patronage of Christian Count Clam Gallas.

During his early years at the Prague Academy, Führich painted, among other things, altar pieces, panel paintings and illustrations for German poets from Bohemia history and the Bible.

Albrecht Dürer was the first powerful influence on Führich's style. On a visit to Vienna in 1822, Medieval and Renaissance art made a similar impression on Führich. His 1824

illustrations for Ludwig Tieck's "Life and Death of St. Genevieve" attracted the interest of Prince Metternich, who helped him obtain a scholarship to study in Italy.

On his arrival in Rome in 1827, Führich joined Friedrich Overbeck and other German artists known as the Nazarene painters. In Rome, he was impressed by Italian Renaissance works, particularly Michelangelo and Raphael. On his return journey to Prague, Führich admired Fra Angelico's paintings and the frescoes in the Camposanto in Pisa.

In the spring of 1834, Führich began the design of the Stations of the Cross at the Laurenziberg in Prague. In the same year, he was named the second curator at the Graf Lamberg's Art Gallery at the Vienna Academy.

Such works as Jacob and Rachel at the Well (1836; Vienna, Belvedere) and the Legend of St. Isidore (1839; Mannheim, Kunsthalle) made Führich the leading representative of Nazarene-style painting in Austria.

In 1840, he acquired the newly established position of Professor of Historic Composition at the Vienna Academy which began his long teaching career at the Academy, retiring in 1872.

From 1844 to 1846 Führich executed his first large monumental work – the Stations of the Cross in the St. John Nepomucene Church in Vienna.

Führich was politically conservative, and during the revolutionary events of 1848 he sought refuge in North Bohemia where he remained until 1849.

From 1854 to 1860, his extensive wall paintings in the Lerchenfelder Church, marked the pinnacle of the late Romantic monumental religious painting in Vienna. With this work, Führich was elevated to Knighthood by Kaiser Franz Joseph I.

Führich's later work consisted largely of prints and drawings with a religious content, which brought him great popularity. Joseph Führich died in Vienna on March 13, 1876. He was one of the most respected artists of his time.

George Seiling¹²

Born August 22, 1818, Bavaria, Germany and received his art training in Bremen. He came to America in 1837 at age 19, opening studios first in Carlisle, then Harrisburg, New York, and in 1846, a studio in Reading. Seiling was a Catholic, and attended first St. Peter's church in Reading and later St. Paul's. In addition to his 1886 renovations at Most Blessed Sacrament Church, Seiling painted there several previous times including around 1850 and again in 1875.¹³

Seiling frescoed over 300 churches in Pennsylvania, New York City, Newark and Trenton New Jersey and in Maryland as well as other states. Seiling died June 27, 1893 at his home in Reading¹⁴.

The Nazarene Painters¹⁵

Johann Friederick Overbeck was the leading member of a group of artists formed in 1809 that became known as the Nazarene painters. Their goal was to return to the honesty and spirituality of the Christian art of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. In 1810, they moved to Rome and lived a semi-monastic life as a way of re-creating the nature of the medieval artists' workshop.

Joseph Führich, who is listed among the notable members of the Nazarene movement and a friend of Overbeck, joined the Nazarenes in Rome in 1827. By 1830 the group disbanded and all except Overbeck returned to Germany, many to teach in German art academies.

¹ "The Work of Father Misteli at Bally", Reading Eagle, Saturday October 15, 1898

² "Parish Account Book July 3, 1886 to December 10, 1888"

³ "Small Church Guide", St. Johann Nepomuk Church, www.pfarre-nepomuk.at

⁴ "Die Kartons zum Wiener Kruezweg Josph Führich", Christian Brandstätter Verlag - Albertina

⁵ "The Religious Art Of Benziger Brothers", Saul Zalesch, American Art, Summer 1999; Vol 13, No 2

⁶ "Catalogue of Church Ornaments", Benziger Brothers, 1889-90

⁷ "Bally Church Nearly Completed", Town and Country Weekly, Pennsburg; February 26, 1910

⁸ Personal notes on visiting Berks County churches with Imhoff paintings, by Dr. Helfried Seliger; 1994

⁹ "Berthold Imhoff Biography", History of Berks County by Morton Montgomery, 1909, pg 495-496

¹⁰ "St. Paul's Roman Catholic Church; The 150th Anniversary Celebration", 2010

¹¹ "Die Kartons zum Wiener Kruezweg Josph Führich", Christian Brandstätter Verlag – Albertina, Biography, pg 92-93 (English translation by Ron Thren and Dr. Allen Viehmeyer)

¹² "Artist, Linguist, Musician and Vocalist, Whose Father Was a Reading Physician", Reading Eagle July 29, 1906 Biographical Sketch of George Seiling & other artists

¹³ "Remodeling of the Catholic Church Altar at Churchville." Reading Times, July 9, 1875, pg 4

¹⁴ "The Death Record", Reading Times, June 28, 1893, pg 4

¹⁵ "Nazarene." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2006. www.britannica.com/eb/article-9055105