

## Mother Brunner, Sister Mildred and the Praying Hands The 24<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Sister Mildred Neuzil's Death

In December of 1832, a 68-year-old Swiss widow traveled with her priest son on pilgrimage to Rome. Frau Maria Anna Brunner had lost her husband after twenty years of marriage and for the next seventeen years raised her five living children by herself. Once the children were established in their adult lives, she began to fulfill a dream of living a solitary life of contemplative prayer.



In 1832 her son invited her to accompany him to Rome, and eager to see the many churches and shrines of Rome, she set out with him. She spent nine months in the Eternal City. During that time, she passed her days traveling from church to church, praying at tombs and shrines, and soaking in the history and sanctity of the martyrs and saints. She found herself returning again and again to the church of St. Nicholas in Carcere where often was heard a passionate preacher who proclaimed the mystery and redeeming power of the



Precious Blood of Jesus. That preacher, Gaspar del Bufalo, was the founder of the Society of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood of which Maria Anna's priest son was soon to be a member.

(Sister Joyce Lehman, C.P.P.S., **A MOTHER'S LEGACY, A Brief Account of the Life and Work of Maria Anna Brunner**, Dayton, Ohio, 1999.)

Maria Anna Brunner, longing for a life of prayer and solitude, had settled in at Castle Loewenberg, Switzerland, where her priest son, now a Precious Blood Father, Father Francis de Sales Brunner, had started a school for boys. He gave his mother a room near the chapel. After her pilgrimage to Rome, Maria dedicated herself to the devotion to the Precious Blood of Jesus and began hours of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. As more women joined her, they began perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the earmark of this community so devoted to the Most Precious Blood of Jesus of which she would be named foundress. After four years of this blissful solitude, Maria died on January 15, 1836. Years later, her remains were brought from Switzerland to Dayton, Ohio, where the present-day Motherhouse of the Sisters of the Precious Blood is located. They were displayed, with her ***“praying hands”*** intact, in a chapel off the main lobby of the convent.

In 1843, Father Brunner, filled with missionary zeal, set out for the United States. At the invitation of Bishop John B. Purcell of Cincinnati, Ohio, he began setting up mission churches throughout the diocese. As the need grew, he asked some of the sisters from Loewenberg to join him. As the number of sisters and seminarians grew, so did the number of convents. Thus began the congregation of the Sisters of the Precious Blood, first centered in Maria Stein and then in Dayton, Ohio. Mildred Marie Neuzil entered this order in 1930 at age 14. The Our Lady of Nativity Convent set up by Father Brunner in New Riegel, Ohio, was considered the cradle of the community. Here, in 1958, Sister Mildred, filled with a longing for a life of solitude and contemplation like Mother Brunner's, entered the cloister established within that convent, within the active order.



Father Paul F. Leibold, Sister Mildred's spiritual director for 32 years, wrote to her on November 13, 1962, after she had entered the cloister, about his own experience in Rome at Vatican II, and his experience with the relic of St. Gaspar del Bufalo.

**The Roman experience was of course exceptional—but I do not know when I was ever so glad to get home; you can imagine this little nothing Bishop sitting in the bleachers like a church mouse amazed at the knowledge and erudition of all those mental giants gathered there as they orate day in and day out in Latin. So I was about as useless there as the dust on the rug; I can do the council a lot more good here at home praying for it and doing the ordinary priestly work of which I am somewhat capable. [Here we see the same kind of humility and simplicity and devotion to one's duty and to prayer in Father Leibold as seen in Mother Brunner and in Sister Mildred Neuzil.]**

**Incidentally, I said daily Mass in Rome (at the Precious Blood Generalate) on the altar of St. Gaspar with his arm bone right in front of me; the body of St. Pius X was just behind where I sat in Council, so I could direct a prayer to him each day, too...**

Speaking of relics, on February 23, 1960, Father Leibold had written Sister Mildred about the relic of Mother Brunner's "**praying hands**" and his "**privilege of being the official witness for the breaking of the seals on the case enclosing her remains at the Motherhouse. They are in the process of cleaning the case, etc., and (I hope) replacing the present wooden case with a metal one. Her "praying hands" are still intact as they were when she was found.**" The praying hands are a special tribute to Mother Brunner's life of prayer, contemplation, and holiness, but the cause for sainthood ceased when no personal writings could be found to support her cause. Her remains are now buried in the cemetery of the Sisters of the Precious Blood in Dayton, Ohio.

There are no accidents with God. Five lives of simple, humble, holy people have been intertwined for God's purpose: St. Gaspar del Bufalo, great preacher on devotion to the Precious Blood of Jesus; Mother Brunner, foundress of the Sisters of the Precious Blood, inspired by his preaching; Sister Mildred Neuzil, a Precious Blood sister and visionary for Our Lady of America, to whom Mother Maria Anna Brunner appeared, calling Sister Mildred **her legacy**; Father Francis de Sales Brunner, who brought Mother's sisters to Ohio and started some of the first convents for the Sisters of the Precious Blood in the United States, particularly the Our Lady of Nativity Convent in New Riegel, Ohio, which would later house the cloister Sister Mildred would join in 1958, so she, like Mother Brunner, could live a life of solitude and contemplation; Father Paul F. Leibold, a native Ohio priest and bishop who would spiritually direct Sister Mildred in her mission for Our Lady of America--the spiritual renewal of the world through contemplation of the Divine Indwelling Presence of the Most Holy Trinity, and the renewal of the family through imitation of the simple virtues of the Holy Family. Is Sister Mildred's mission the mission for which Mother Brunner prayed for so ardently for her community? Herewith is Sister's account of the vision of Mother Maria Anna Brunner. We surmise that Mother's appearance to this simple, contemplative sister, instead of to one of the more highly educated of the active part of the order, and in the black habit instead of the grey one the sisters had already adopted in 1955, speaks volumes about the identical spirits and spiritualities of Mother Brunner and Sister Mildred and their vocations to the contemplative life, a spirit more appreciated in the order's earlier days. For Mother, prayer and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament were the first duties of her daughters. Sister Mildred was a perfect exemplar of Mother's spirit. **No wonder Mother Brunner sees Sister Mildred**



Neuzil as her legacy, even though Sister had to separate from the Sisters of the Precious Blood in order to be faithful to her contemplative vocation!

### Mother Brunner - June 26, 1958

This morning, all of a sudden, the thought of our first Sisters came to my mind. I was thinking of how holy they must have been, and a great love and reverence filled my heart. At that moment a voice said to me: **“You are their crown. In you they will be glorified.”** Later in the day, during the afternoon meditation hour, Mother Brunner suddenly appeared towards the left of the kneeling bench. She was dressed in her black habit with the small cross hanging from her neck. She was smiling, and although her face was very white, it was radiant. The whiteness of her face seemed to be the result of the radiance that emanated from it. At least, so it appeared to me. Then I saw many Sisters in black surrounding her. They turned towards her, bowing slightly in an attitude of respect and love, smiling to her as they did so. Then turning, they smiled upon me, and oh, the happiness I saw on their faces. It filled me with great joy. I knew, too, at that moment how greatly they loved me, and this added to my happiness. Then Mother Brunner spoke to me:

**“You are my beloved daughter, my glory and my crown. It is not necessary that I be glorified on earth. It is enough that I be glorified in you, my daughter. Tell my children that they must be more fervent in living a life of immolation and sacrifice for the glory of the Precious Blood, to which they have dedicated their lives. This not only Our Lord requires of them, but I also require it of them if they wish to be truly my daughters.”**

**“Long have I prayed both on earth and in heaven that God would mark the Community, that through me, so humble an instrument He brought into being, with a special mission and grace. My desires have been realized in you, cherished daughter. Truly, you are after my own heart. These, my daughters, who dwell with me in the Bosom of God, rejoice with me and give praise to the Most High for the glory that will come to the Most Precious Blood of Jesus Christ through you, beloved and privileged daughter.”**

**“Continue in your way of love and suffering for I, your spiritual mother, with your holy Sisters who are with me, will watch over you and the Community destined by God, through you, to fulfill a great and noble mission. The mother is honored in the daughter. It is thus I am honored in you. And they, the elder members of the religious family to which God has called you, will not fail to watch over their little sister upon earth. Their intercession, too, is unceasing for the members of that Community so dear to my heart and theirs.”**

**“Precious daughter, I place the mantle of my spirit upon you. Spread it over the Community that all may be penetrated with my spirit. It must be so, because it must prepare itself for the abundance of graces God is about to shower upon it. Thus it must make itself more worthy of His goodness.”**

We celebrate the 24<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sister Mildred Neuzil’s death on January 10th, 2000, confident she is in the Bosom of God with Mother Brunner, her elder sisters, Archbishop Paul F. Leibold, Father Francis de Sales Brunner, and St. Gaspar del Bufalo, who are all praying for us, many of whom have fallen prey to the errors of modernity.

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