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# the founding of a congregation

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## Hospital Sisters celebrate anniversary



Father Christopher Bernsmeyer, OFM, a Franciscan devoted to the care of the poor and sick and the founding priest of the Hospital Sisters Congregation in 1844

Ironically, the emperor Napoleon may have had something to do with the founding of the Hospital Sisters' congregation 164 years ago in Germany on July 2. It all began with the founding priest, Johann Christoph Bernsmeyer, OFM, born in 1777 on a farm in Germany. He became a committed Franciscan priest in an era when Catholic leaders were persecuted for their faith.

At the age of 24, he entered the Novitiate of the Franciscan Province of the Holy Cross and after his profession to the Order of Friars Minor (OFM) and continued his studies during a politically turbulent time. On August 11, 1802, King Frederick III decreed that all men's monasteries would be forbidden to accept novices and allow them to make profession. Two weeks later, this prohibition was attached to the doors of all the churches. Despite the church and state tensions, Father Christopher was ordained, finished theological studies and was sent out from his Monastery to Münster, a town with great need, for parish work. Because his transfer was made without the formal governmental permission, the German government considered this a political crime and in 1805 ordered Father Christopher to leave Münster within six weeks. The Provincial church leaders wrote a 14-page excuse to the King and the government relented.

### **napoleonic eminent domain**

Tension between the government and the Church continued, and one day, in 1811, a notice was posted on Father Christopher's Franciscan Monastery in Münster that read: "...Now therefore I, Napoleon I, Emperor of the French, do decree that the aforementioned Franciscan Monastery at Muenster, Westphalia, be, and hereby is, dissolved; that all property of whatsoever kind appertaining thereto be forfeited to the state; and that all members thereof be expelled and dispersed." Father Christopher and the other friars were forced to leave and the Monastery became a barracks and their church became a stable and then a prison.



*Napoleon in His Study* by Jacques-Louis David (1812)

Father Christopher moved to nearby Telgte, an impoverished town where many pilgrims passed through to visit an important shrine, the Our Lady of Grace Chapel. Here he served as assistant pastor at St. Clements Church and began to visit the sick poor of the rural districts. The need was too great, however, and he realized that a religious nursing organization devoted to the sick poor was needed. He purchased a former leper house and worked to build an orphanage.

### **grace reflected in caring**

On July 2, 1844, in Our Lady of Grace Chapel, he officially welcomed five girls as Sisters to the Third Order, which constituted the founding of the Community of the Hospital Sisters of St. Francis. This group based their religious life on the rules of the Third Order of St. Francis approved by Pope Leo X in 1521. Kneeling before the wooden pieta where

thousands of pilgrims had also prayed, these girls devoted their lives to the service of God and His people.



*Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, by Jacques-Louis David.



Our Lady of Grace Chapel (also known as the Shrine of the Sorrowful Mother) in Telgte, Germany, the founding place of the Hospital Sisters (the Pietà statue inside of Mary cradling the crucified Christ was created in 1370 and captures the Sisters' caring spirit and mission)

### **a ministry spanning the globe**

Political and governmental restrictions continued to complicate the growth of the new community in Germany, yet the need was great and the passion and dedication of the Sisters was strong. The Congregation grew, and before his death in Telgte on June 2, 1858, at the age of 81, Father Christopher lived to see much accomplished what filled his heart with joy. Today, Father Christopher's vision of a nursing sister has grown into a 164-year-old Congregation of Hospital Sisters serving the poor, sick, and needy throughout the world. Presently, there are 1179 Sisters in four Provinces (Germany, Poland, USA, and Japan) and one Region (India) who strive to be Christ's healing presence and to bring this healing presence to others.