

Religious art has nourished faith since original Luxembourgish settlers arrived in northwest Iowa.

One artwork, now more than 170 years old, can be viewed in the front entrance of Spalding Catholic School, Alton, IA. The statue of the Virgin Mary accompanied immigrants from Luxembourg on their trip across the Atlantic in the 1840s. It portrays a mother clad in traditional blue and white robes, holding the child Jesus on her left arm, while both extend their right hand toward the viewer.

The immigrants who brought the statue left Luxembourg looking for a better life in a country where they would also be free to practice their Catholic faith. The group first settled in St. Donatus, IA, south of Dubuque. They left St. Donatus in early 1870, seeking cheap land in the west. According to Mrs. Florence Ginsbach, whose husband was the grandson of one of the original settlers, the pioneers carried the statue in an ox-drawn wagon across Iowa. On many occasions, it was necessary for one of the women in the group to hold the statue on her lap while crossing rough terrain or when fording the rivers, creeks and sloughs. The group and the statue arrived safely in the Alton area May 19, 1870.

The statue was placed in the "prairie church", St. Donatus, built southeast of Alton in 1881. When St. Donatus was torn down in 1896, the statue moved to the new parish, St. Mary's in Alton. It later spent many years in the school chapel, until being moved to its present position in Spalding's entry way.

Another piece of religious iconography, a statue of Our Lady, Comforter of the Afflicted, can be seen in St. Mary's Church, Remsen. Popularly known as Our Lady of Luxembourg, the statue was hand-carved from linden wood and imported from Luxembourg. A gift of three women of St. Mary's Parish, Catherine Scharff, Annie Kieffer, and Katherine

Wollwert, the work was unveiled May 2, 1939.

Devotion to Our Lady, Comforter of the Afflicted, also called Our Lady of Consolation, became widespread in Luxembourg during the seventeenth century when people begged her intercession for relief from the plague. Similar sculptures can be seen in churches throughout Luxembourg today.

Statues of Our Lady of Consolation are typically dressed in rich vestments; the ornate clothing on the sculpture in St. Mary's Church was sewn by parishioner Doris Weiler. The robes rotate through several outfits according to the time of year: a white satin set for winter, a lighter white set for summer, purple for Lent, and blue for Advent.

On June 6-7, 2020, the sesquicentennial of arrival of Luxembourg immigrants in the Alton area will be celebrated. During the festival, self-guided tours will direct participants to these and other artworks and sites related to Luxembourg immigrant history.

The Luxembourg Heritage Society of Northwest Iowa is planning the festival. Anyone interested in helping is invited to the Society's next meeting Saturday, July 13, at 9:30 a.m. at the Remsen Public Library. Everyone is welcome.