

Our Grotto and its History

Saint Paul Seminary and
University of St. Thomas Office for Mission



*Seminarians in procession into the Grotto at the
Saint Paul Seminary on Grotto Sunday, May 1941*

A grotto, or a rock formation dedicated as a shrine or place of worship, is traced back to both ancient Greek and Roman culture. But even in the Old Testament of the Bible, the Book of Kings speaks about the prophet Eliijah discovering God in a cave (1 Kings 19:12-13 RSVCE):

[A]nd after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And when Eli'jah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him, and said, "What are you doing here, Eli'jah?"

As the Roman Empire grew increasingly Christian, pagan grottos were converted into Christian spaces of prayer. A significant resurgence of Catholic interest in shrines hewn from the rock came when Our Lady appeared to Saint Bernadette in 1858 in Lourdes, France. At that location, now a massive multi-level church above the grotto where Mary appeared, the natural spring that appeared has been attributed to over seventy miraculous cures and 7,000 reported cases of healing. Today we see thousands of pilgrimage grottos and even more unofficial places of prayer within the sacred spaces of rock coves.



*Seminarians from the Saint Paul Seminary gathered
in front of the shrine to the
Virgin Mary in the Grotto, ca. 1938*

Our grotto here at St. Thomas, originally part of The Saint Paul Seminary campus and tucked near the Archbishop Ireland Memorial Library on what is now known as south campus, was built by a plucky group of seminarians at The Saint Paul Seminary over a century ago. They began in 1917 and dedicated it on May 21, 1919. It is noteworthy that the Seminary's most famous alumnus, Blessed Fulton J. Sheen, was a seminarian here from 1917-1919. While not a documented fact, it is likely that Sheen himself was part of this effort. The accompanying module of the "Stations of the Cross" features prayer meditations by Blessed Fulton Sheen.



*Seminarian Robert Probst praying along the
Stations of the Cross in the Grotto of the
Saint Paul Seminary, May 1942*

At the time, it was the desire of the seminarians to honor the Blessed Virgin Mary and to encourage praying the Stations of the Cross before large stone crosses in this quiet ravine. A small stream runs through the site along the glen down toward the Mississippi River. The original alcove contained a simple wooden altar and statue of Our Lady. Thirteen years later, the seminarians formed the "Grotto Society" to continue care for the site, installing a larger statute of the Blessed Mother. Another thirteen years later in 1943, the seminarians built and installed concrete and marble Stations of the Cross, a particular Catholic devotion of meditation on Our Lord's Passion and Death.



*Statue of the Virgin Mary in the Grotto of the
Saint Paul Seminary, May 1941*

The University of St. Thomas assumed ownership of the grotto in 1986 as part of its Affiliation Agreement with The Saint Paul Seminary. In the past three decades, the grotto had once again shown need for renovation as time and nature have eroded the crosses, the path, and the stability of some of the trees. The newly-restored grotto, dedicated in the fall of 2026, includes two artist-commissioned pieces: a statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe and Stations of the Cross. It also features restored stone walls and paths, and second footbridge to extend the length of the walk, all within the natural beauty of the ravine. With an eye to safety, improved lighting and a public safety call boxes are available.

Please enjoy this shared space of peace and prayer.



*A view of the Shrine to the Virgin Mary in the Grotto
at the Saint Paul Seminary, ca. 1930*