

The Shrine of the Grotto of the Redemption is a religious shrine located in West Bend, Iowa, in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Sioux City. A conglomeration of nine grottos depicting scenes in the life of Jesus, the Grotto contains a large collection of minerals and petrifications and is believed to be the largest grotto in the world. It is also "considered to be the world's most complete man-made collection of minerals, fossils, shells, and petrifications in one place." The total value of all the rocks and minerals which make up the Grotto is over \$4,308,000. Over 100,000 people visit the Grotto each year. The shrine includes a museum with precious and semiprecious stones from throughout the world, and photos and artifacts about the construction of the shrine.

The story of how the Grotto came into being is as moving as are the scenes it portrays. It is generally told as a fact that as a young seminarian, Father Paul Dobberstein became critically ill with pneumonia. As he fought for his life he prayed to the Blessed Virgin Mary (the Mother of God) to intercede for him for the grace of health. He promised to build a shrine in her honor if he lived. The illness passed and the student completed his studies and after his ordination he came to West Bend as Pastor in 1898. For over a decade he was stockpiling rocks and precious stones. The actual work of giving permanence to his promise began to take shape in 1912 and continued year around for 42 years. The designed purpose of the Grotto is to tell in silent stone made spiritually eloquent, the story of man's fall and his redemption by Christ, the savior of the world. Father Dobberstein used the knowledge and skills gained during construction of his first grotto honoring Our Lady of Lourdes, while training at St. Francis Seminary in St. Francis, Wisconsin. His method was to set fancy rocks and gems into concrete. In 1946, Father Louis Greving began helping Dobberstein with the construction. The grotto covered an area the size of a city block when Dobberstein died in 1954. Matt Szerencse helped work on the grotto until his retirement in 1959. The Grotto has been maintained by Deacon Gerald Streit since 1994. West Bend is located in the center of a vast, lush, level expanse of Iowa farmland. Wise, industrious and fairly prosperous farmers populate the surrounding area. It is located northwest of Fort Dodge about midway between the busy state highways: number 18 to the north and number 20 to the south. On most road maps, West Bend is marked as the site of the Grotto of the Redemption. It might seem odd that here where scarcely any type of rock is known, not to mention any deposits of precious geological specimens, that this collection of unique stone should be found. However, it is merely the play of divine providence that determined the setting in this particular place. This site was chosen because the Bishop decided to send Father Dobberstein to that particular parish, located in West Bend, Iowa. Father Dobberstein's works inspired Mathias Wernerus (who also attended St. Francis Seminary) to build the Dickeyville Grotto in Dickeyville, Wisconsin, in 1930, thus starting the grotto building movement in America. As of August 1, 2015, the grotto has been raised to the status of diocesan shrine by R. Walker Nickless, Bishop of Sioux City. This is the first Catholic religious shrine designated in the diocese.

