

FIRSTFRUITS

"Contemplate the FirstFruits of renewed humanity, that is to say, Christ Himself."

— Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *De Adoratione in spiritu et veritate*

*"...my eyes have seen
Your Salvation."*

— LUKE 2:30



*"Dear Brothers and Sisters, may the Holy Spirit today enlighten our hearts,
that we may recognize the Infant Jesus, born in Bethlehem of the Virgin Mary,
the salvation given by God to each one of us, to each man and woman and to all the peoples of the earth.*

*May the power of Christ, which brings freedom and service, be felt in so many hearts afflicted by war, persecution, and slavery. May this divine power,
by its meekness, take away the hardness of heart of so many men and women immersed in worldliness and indifference, the globalization of indifference.*

May His redeeming strength transform arms into ploughshares, destruction into creativity, hatred into love and tenderness.

Then we will be able to cry out with joy: 'Our eyes have seen Your salvation.'

— Pope Francis, December 25, 2014 Christmas "Urbi et Orbi" Address



Beloved Confreres, Parents, Family, Benefactors, and Friends,

Laudetur Jesus Christus! In this Year of Consecrated Life, called by our Holy Father Pope Francis, we contemplate Christ in a special way as the “Consecrated One par excellence” [Vita consecrata, 9], entirely dedicated to the Father and His salvific Will from the first moment of His conception in Mary’s womb [cf. HEBREWS 10:5-7]. This is brought out especially in His Presentation in the Temple, when Mary and Joseph offered Him to the Eternal Father as the FirstFruits of our humanity [cf. LUKE 22:ff]. As “a living memorial of Jesus’ way of living and acting as the Incarnate Word in relation to the Father and in relation to the brethren” [Vita consecrata, 22], it is especially in this light that the consecrated life seeks to make Him present in the Church and world today.

In this grace-filled Year of Consecrated Life and on this annual World Day of Consecrated Life, first established by Pope Saint John Paul II in 1997, we thank our Heavenly Father for His many blessings, especially for our families, truly our first and greatest benefactors, who taught us the meaning of love and sacrifice, and for all of you, our brothers and sisters in Christ, for your ongoing prayerful support of this first North American community of cloistered Norbertine canonesses.

In our Divine Redeemer,
Mother Mary Augustine O. Praem.

Mother Mary Augustine, O. Praem., Prioress
& the Norbertine Canonesses of the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph

**Rejoice in the wonderful works of the Lord for
He has given us hope through the birth of His Son.**



The Prophets sang that the Maker of heaven and earth would come on earth among men; the Angel announced that the Creator of flesh and spirit would come in the flesh; John in the mother’s womb saluted the Savior in Mary’s womb; Simeon the old man recognized God in the Child.
— Saint Augustine, Sermon 13 on the Season



Let us all cry out with great joy:

**Glory to God
in the highest!**

With the angels and patriarchs and prophets, we praise You, Lord.

With Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, our whole being proclaims Your greatness, Lord.

With the apostles and evangelists, we give You thanks, Lord.

With all the holy martyrs, we offer our bodies to You as consecrated victims.

With all Your holy witnesses in the Church, we dedicate our lives to You in deepest faith.

— Liturgy of the Hours, Morning Prayer Intercessions Thursday after Epiphany to the Baptism of the Lord



Our Bishop, the Most Rev. Armando Ochoa of the Diocese of Fresno, discusses with Mother the plans for our future chapel, in which, as canonesses, we will be dedicated to Divine Worship through the Sacred Liturgy – the first and essential form of our apostolate – glorifying God in the name of the Church and calling down graces upon Her. Bishop Ochoa graciously gave his formal approval and blessing for us to begin fund-raising for this next phase of our monastery expansion project [see His Excellency’s letter BELOW].

DIOCESE OF FRESNO
PASTORAL CENTER
1550 NORTH FRESNO STREET
FRESNO, CALIFORNIA 93703-3788
TELEPHONE (559) 488-7400

December 22, 2014

Mother Mary Augustine, O. Praem., Prioress
Norbertine Canonesses of the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph
17831 Water Canyon Road
Tehachapi, CA 93561

Dear Mother Mary Augustine,

This letter is in response to the requests in your letter that you hand delivered to me on October 15, 2014, and following up on our discussions that day.

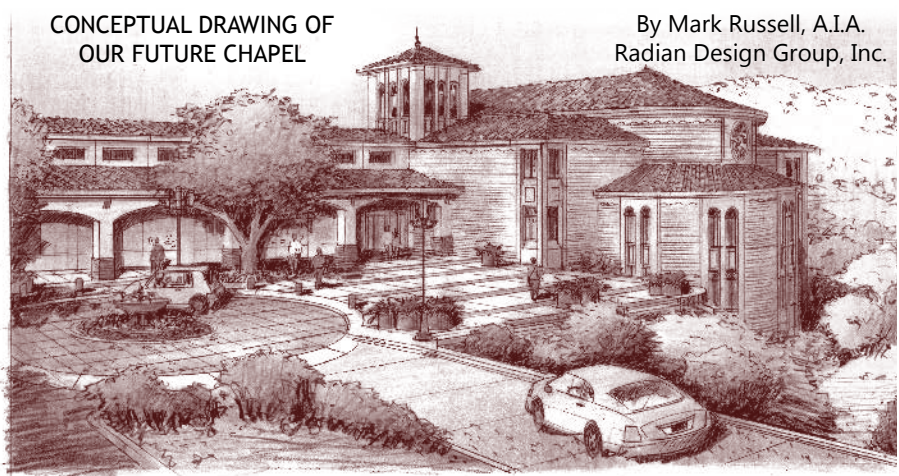
In accordance with Canon 1262, I hereby formally grant approval to begin fund-raising for your planned future chapel as a part of your monastery expansion project. As mentioned during our meeting, I will be sending this letter also to all of my pastors, so that they in turn can publish it in their parish bulletins on your behalf. May hearts be moved to help you with this much-needed sacred project, understanding that you spend over seven hours in prayer daily in your chapel for the needs of the Church and the world, which currently is located in the former living/game room of a ranch house, and is becoming very tight, with your community having grown from the seven sisters who moved to the property back in 2000 to your current number of 32, with more young women discerning entrance as well.

May God continue to bless you and your sisters in this holy endeavor, and bring to completion the work He has begun in you and your community. We are truly blessed to have the only cloistered community in the diocese, which prays daily for all our priests and especially for the diocese as an integral part of your canonical vocation. May God continue to bless you with vocations as you build up the Kingdom of God in the southern part of our diocese.

Sincerely in Christ,

Armando X. Ochoa

Most Reverend Armando X. Ochoa, D.D.
Bishop, Diocese of Fresno



CONCEPTUAL DRAWING OF OUR FUTURE CHAPEL

By Mark Russell, A.I.A.
Radian Design Group, Inc.

**RECENT VISITS AT
THE BETHLEHEM PRIORY**



ABOVE: The Most Rev. Paul Sirba, bishop of the Diocese of Duluth, Minnesota, and Rev. Ryan Moravitz, Vocation Director, celebrate Mass in our chapel with our Provost, the Very Rev. Alphonsus Mary Hermes, O. Praem., during their October visit to our priory. Two of our Sisters are Minnesota natives, and Duluth is their “home diocese.” Bishop Sirba’s father is named Norbert, and during a recent visit to Prague, His Excellency made a pilgrimage to the Norbertine Abbey of Strahov, where Saint Norbert’s relics are enshrined.



ABOVE: The Reliquary of Saint Norbert Norbertine Abbey of Strahov, Czech Republic

RIGHT: We were blessed to be visited in September by one of our Norbertine confreres from the Abbey of Strahov, Rev. Marek Drábek, O. Praem., who shared with us the challenges of preaching the Gospel in a country where atheism and secularism are particularly widespread, even among the youth.



“AND I CONSECRATE MYSELF FOR THEM...”

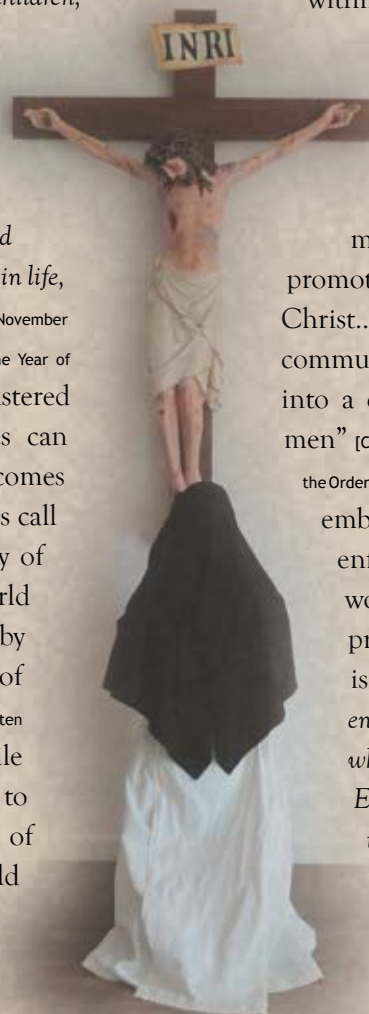
— JOHN 17:19

In this grace-filled “Year of Consecrated Life,” Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People, exhorted us in the words of Christ, “Go into all the world!” [MARK 16:15] saying: “A whole world awaits us: men and women who have lost all hope, families in difficulty, abandoned children, young people without a future, the elderly, sick and abandoned, those who are rich in the world’s goods but impoverished within, men and women looking for a purpose in life, thirsting for the divine...” [November 21, 2014 Section II: Expectations for the Year of Consecrated Life, 4]. How cloistered contemplative canonesses can “go into the world” becomes clear if we heed the Pope’s call to spread the “spirituality of communion” in a world increasingly marked by the “globalization of indifference” [Pope Francis, Lenten Message, January 27, 2015], while looking with gratitude to the origin and charism of our almost 900-year-old Order.

Desiring to return to the apostolic way of life, our holy father St. Norbert adopted for his followers the Rule of St. Augustine, which sets forth the ideal of the early Church in Jerusalem as described in the Acts of the Apostles: “to have one heart and one soul seeking God” [Rule 1.1, cf. ACTS 4:32]. This is the same unity Jesus asked His Father for on the eve of His Passion, praying, “I do not pray for these [the apostles] only, but also for those who believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one...” [JOHN 17:20-21]

To fulfill this desire of Our Lord for unity, which lies at the very heart of both the Church and our Order’s charism, Norbertines strive first to actualize this *communio* within our own communities [cf. Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People*, 3].

But it is not meant to be confined within the cloister walls; instead, we are to draw the whole world into it. Our Constitutions declare that our “primary apostolic mission” consists “in promoting this unity in Christ... [T]he *communio* of our communities should overflow into a charity that embraces all men” [Constitutions of the Canonesses Regular of the Order of Prémontré, 71]. This maternal embrace of a canoness enfolds every person in the world through the powerful prayer of the Liturgy, which is “above all the prayer of the entire community of mankind, which Christ joins to Himself. Each individual has his part in this prayer, which is common to the one Body as it offers prayers that give expression to the voice of Christ’s beloved Bride, to the hopes and desires of the whole Christian people, to the supplications and petitions for the necessities common to all mankind” [Blessed Pope Paul VI, *Laudis Canticum*, 8]. Thus, through the merciful love of God and our persistent cry before Him, may all who have lost hope, all who are despairing, all those looking for their higher purpose in life, and all struggling families, be brought into the enduring and unchanging family of Christ.



The Year of Consecrated Life

NOVEMBER 30, 2014 – FEBRUARY 2, 2016

“The monastery is the prophetic place where creation becomes praise of God and the precept of concretely lived charity becomes the ideal of human coexistence; it is where the human being seeks God without limitation or impediment, becoming a reference point for all people, bearing them in his heart and helping them to seek God.”

— Pope Saint John Paul II, *Oriente Lumen*, 9



Original artwork by the Norbertine Canonesses of the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph, inspired by art of the Norbertines of “Klooster Ter Apel” and by the Norbertine Abbey of Mondaye, France

Plenary Indulgences Offered for the Year of Consecrated Life

During the Year of Consecrated Life (November 30, 2014 to February 2, 2016) plenary indulgences may be obtained by all individual members of Institutes of Consecrated Life and other truly repentant faithful moved by a spirit of charity, under the usual conditions of Sacramental Confession, Eucharistic Communion, and prayer for the intentions of the Holy Father, either:

- In Rome, ...
- In all Particular Churches, at each time in which, on the diocesan days dedicated to consecrated life and in the diocesan celebrations set for the Year of Consecrated Life, they piously visit the Cathedral or another holy place designated and approved by the local Ordinary, or a conventual church, or an oratory of a Cloistered Monastery, and there recite publicly the Liturgy of the Hours or, for an appropriate amount of time, dedicate themselves to pious thoughts [reflection], concluding with the Our Father, the Profession of Faith in any legitimately approved form, and pious invocations of the Blessed Virgin Mary.”

— Decree promulgated by the Apostolic Penitentiary, November 23, 2014, Solemnity of Christ, King of the Universe

ON CHRISTMAS 1121 AT PRÉMONTRÉ, FRANCE, NORBERT AND HIS COMPANIONS MADE THEIR RELIGIOUS PROFESSION, LINKING OUR ORDER FOREVER WITH THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST’S INCARNATION —

The Christmas Mystery



“We as an Order are grateful first of all for the gift of this ‘Year of Consecrated Life’, then for the jubilee year ‘900-year conversion of St. Norbert, the Father of our Order’ [May 28, 2015] and finally we feel called, as we do each year, to celebrate, with deep faith and moved inwardly, the Solemnity of Christmas, the feast of the birth of the Lord to Whom alone our life is dedicated and to Whom we may again and again turn to and come home to... I wish all of you much peace, light and grace ‘from Him, Who has taken on our human nature’ and Who has appointed us to participate deeply and profoundly in this incarnation.”

— From the 2014 Christmas Letter of our Father Abbot General Thomas Handgrättinger, O.Praem.



Original artwork by the Norbertine Canonesses of the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph

“THE GENEALOGY OF
Our Lord Jesus Christ,
THE SON OF DAVID, THE SON OF ABRAHAM”
— MATTHEW 1:1



At Christmas Matins here at the Bethlehem Priory, our Provost, the Very Rev. Alphonsus Mary Hermes, O.Praem., chants the genealogy of Our Lord from the Gospel of Matthew. Father in his homily at Midnight Mass noted that consecrated persons, who are called to take Christ as their Bridegroom, are placed into this genealogy in a special way.

Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph FUNDING UPDATES

We are grateful to all of you who have helped to make our monastery expansion building a reality, and we thank you for your prayers and material help with our current three most pressing capital projects:

1. PURCHASE OF OUR LAND FROM ST. MICHAEL'S ABBEY

View of the monastery property located at 5,500 feet in the Tehachapi Mountains



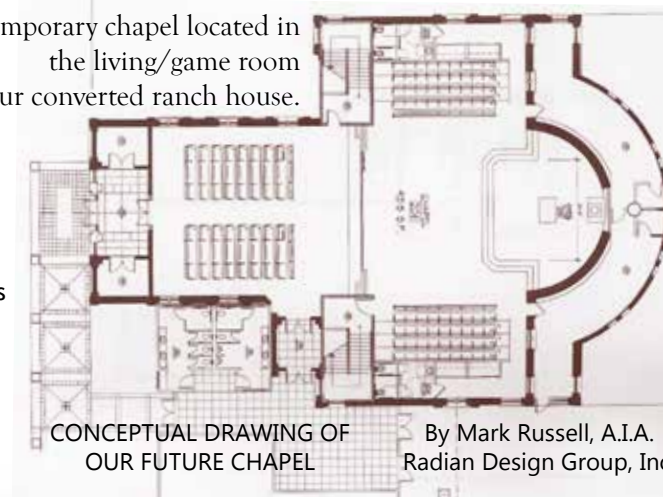
2. MILKING PARLOR MODIFICATIONS

We are addressing additional requirements for our milking parlor and the surrounding areas, which are necessary to receive the licenses and permits for our Grade A dairy for producing our cheese.



3. FUTURE CHAPEL & ACCESSORY AREAS

To replace our current temporary chapel located in the living/game room of our converted ranch house.



(See page 3 for Bishop Ochoa's letter.)

Your tax-deductible* monetary gift, of whatever amount, will continue to make a difference in our lives:

1. Make checks to: "Norbertine Canonesses" (Memo: Please specify "Land Fund," "Milking Parlor Fund," or "Chapel Fund")
2. Donate via PayPal on our website: www.norbertinesisters.org for on-line credit card donations

* We are a 501(c)(3) religious non-profit organization.

A very special thank you to Powers and Sandy Griffin, Jim and Kathy Kramer, Kory and Lauren Kramer, and all those involved in the October 26, 2014 "Sisters Helping Sisters" Autumn Tea and Live Auction benefiting our Priory, providing approximately \$45,000 to our community, which we will gratefully put toward the required modifications of our milking parlor. While we could not attend due to our cloistered vocation, our Provost, the Very Rev. Alphonsus Mary Hermes, O.Praem., was present and gave the luncheon blessing to the gathered family members and friends of our community, long-standing and new.

*Sisters Helping Sisters
Autumn Tea & Live Auction*



OUR 2014 ANNUAL RETREAT: SPIRITUAL CHILDHOOD IN THE PSALMS

During our annual retreat in September, our confrere from St. Michael's Abbey, Rev. Gregory Dick, O. Praem., preached on the book of Psalms as the "prayerbook of spiritual childhood." This spiritual childhood, as renewed in our times by Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, emphasizes the unfathomable mercy and faithfulness of God, our Abba – or Papa – and our privileged role as His children. Because of this relationship, we can trustingly open up to God, our refuge and shelter, and bring to Him exactly what is on our heart: all our hopes, fears, desires, and brokenness, which He will always heal, if only we will let Him. Knowledge of this unsurpassed grace gives us the childlike disposition to break forth in a song of humble gratitude, despite any hardships or trials we face in this life. For indeed, as the Psalmist exclaims, "His love endures forever" [PSALM 118].



OUR HORARIUM (OR SCHEDULE) *(Please call for our Friday and Sunday schedules)*

Midnight	Vigils – Office of Readings (Matins)
6:00 am	Morning prayer (Lauds) & Angelus
6:30 am	Martyrology & Chapter
7:15 am	Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament & Mid-morning prayer (Terce)
8:20 am	Benediction
8:30 am	The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
10:00 am	Work, Class, or Study
11:45 am	Mid-day prayer (Sext), Angelus & Rosary
1:00 pm	Mid-afternoon prayer (None)
1:30 pm	Grand Silence - prayer, rest, exercise, etc.
2:30 pm	Work, Class, or Study
5:15 pm	Evening prayer (Vespers) & Angelus
5:45 pm	Lectio Divina
6:30 pm	Supper, followed by Recreation
8:00 pm	Night prayer (Compline)
9:00 pm	"Lights Out"

SOME OF OUR WORK INCLUDES...
 accounting ✦ administration ✦ archiving ✦ correspondence & thank you's ✦ logging prayer requests, prayer enrollments ✦ phones & reception ✦ Bethany Guest House ✦ gift shop ✦ apothecary ✦ artisanal cheese-making ✦ sacred vestments ✦ wreaths ✦ bees/honey ✦ chickens, baby cows & goats, cats & dogs



Sisters harvesting potatoes

✦ preparing the Liturgy ✦ sacristy ✦ class & study ✦ library ✦ preparing for teaching classes ✦ cleaning ✦ cooking & dishes ✦ housekeeping ✦ ironing & laundry ✦ sewing & mending ✦ building ✦ maintenance & upkeep ✦ firewood ✦ gardening, harvesting, mowing, planting, lavender, pruning ✦ ...and more!



THE NORBERTINE CANONASSES OF THE BETHLEHEM PRIORY OF ST. JOSEPH
17831 Water Canyon Road
Tehachapi, California 93561-7686 USA

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A very special "thank you" to our generous friends and benefactors, the Con-way Charitable Foundation, the Michigan home office Con-way Freight marketing group, and our local Bakersfield service center manager and freight operation supervisor, who annually play an integral role in our Christmas wreath fundraiser—with particular recognition of their efforts to ensure delivery of our balsam boughs amidst the challenges of snowstorms and freezing cold temperatures, enabling us to assemble our Christmas wreaths for our friends across the country.

God bless you all!

- BETHANY GUEST HOUSE -
Sharing with you the Norbertine charism of prayer and hospitality



For parents visiting from afar, for those discerning religious vocations, for anyone seeking a time of

more intense prayer and solitude...it's for you.
(Day visits and overnight stays are possible.)

Call now to schedule your visit and for details (weather, dress, etc.): (661) 823-1066

ST. NORBERT MEDAL & STATUE

Please see our website, www.norbertinesisters.org, to learn more about the Saint Norbert statue and medals commissioned by the Norbertine Canonesses.

Now Available:
Bronze Medal



SACRED VESTMENTS



If you are interested in purchasing our vestments made by the Sisters, please contact us at: (661) 823-1066 or e-mail at MotherMaryA@aol.com

THE NORBERTINE CANONASSES' MONASTERY GIFT SHOP



Welcome!

Open 10-11:30 am

& 2:30-5:00 pm daily (Friday 4:15 pm)

Our inventory includes religious goods & books; home-made biscotti, jam, honey, & apothecary items; aprons, baptismal baby blankets; & dried flower, calligraphy & other greeting cards. Ask about our gift certificates & prayer enrollment cards.

ART ON THE COVER:
"Simeon in the Temple"
by Jürgen Ovens (1623-1678)

A special thank you to the friends who funded this issue of our *FirstFruits* newsletter!

To learn more about our cloistered contemplative Norbertine way of life, make prayer requests, inquire about our vestments, gift shop, or Bethany Guest House, you are welcome to phone (661) 823-1066 or email us: pray_req@cybersurfers.net or MotherMaryA@aol.com.

Also, please kindly help us update our address & email database by sending us your current information.

Please check www.norbertinesisters.org for the downloadable version of this newsletter.

May God reward you for helping to build this first North American foundation of Norbertine Canonesses!