

The background of the entire page is a classical painting depicting the Annunciation. The Virgin Mary is seated on the right, wearing a blue mantle over a red gown, with her hands clasped in prayer. The Angel Gabriel is kneeling on the left, wearing a blue robe with a red sash and large white wings, gesturing towards Mary. Above them, a white dove representing the Holy Spirit is surrounded by several cherubs (putti) floating in the sky.

The Norbertine Canonesses of the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph

FIRST FRUITS

The Annunciation of the Lord, March 2019 / Issue 46

"THE POWER OF THE MOST HIGH WILL OVERSHADOW YOU..."

— Luke 1:35

Dear Confreres, Family and Friends of the Bethlehem Priory,

In the midst of the penitential season of Lent, the Church pauses to reflect on the mystery of the Annunciation — the day that God sent the Archangel Gabriel to the Blessed Virgin Mary with the message that she would become the Mother of God, if she chose to consent. Mary responded with all the generosity of her soul: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38) At this “fiat,” the power of the Most High completely overshadowed her, and the Word, the second person of the Trinity, took on our human flesh, thus espousing all mankind to Himself. His mission on earth had begun; a mission to transform the world by the power of His love, and to conquer the hearts of all mankind, not by force but by loving invitation.

And His Mother, perfectly united to Him, is forever united to His saving mission.

In this issue of FirstFruits, we give thanks to God for this mystery of the Incarnation, as we experience its fruits in our own lives: as we witness the professions of our sisters, who have chosen Jesus Christ as their Spouse; as we daily strive to continue His mission of transforming the world by self-sacrificing love; and as we entrust ourselves to His Mother, knowing that, at the Annunciation, she has also accepted *us* as her children.

May this merciful God and His gracious Mother overshadow you with their love and guidance this Lenten season, and lead you to the joys of Easter.

Prayerfully in Christ and Our Lady,

Mother Mary Augustine O. Praem.

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

Mother gives an exhortation at our daily Chapter.

Mary, Cause of our Joy

“AS IT WERE, THE DWELLING OF ALL OUR REJOICING
IS IN YOU, O HOLY MOTHER OF GOD!”

— Antiphon from the Solemnity of the Annunciation

“Rejoice highly favored one, the Lord is with you!”

The Lord was with her,
and she was full of Him — full of grace.

The Almighty politely asked,
Mary humbly consented,
and the Son of the Father
leapt down from His mighty throne.
The Joy of our joys, the Light of our life,
now dwelt in Mary.

Truly the dwelling of our joy is in her,
our Life is alive in her,
and she, keeping nothing for herself,
lifts up our grateful hearts to Him
Who has done this great thing.

— By a Norbertine Canoness



Espoused to Jesus Christ

SOLEMN PROFESSION: FEBRUARY 2, 2019

“When the time had come He went forth
like the bridegroom from His bridal chamber,
embracing His bride, holding her in His arms.

Men sang songs and angels melodies,
celebrating the marriage of two such as these.”

— Excerpt from *The Divine Romance* by St. John of the Cross

On February 2, 2019, the Feast of the Presentation, Sr. Mary Thomas made her solemn profession at St. Malachy’s Catholic Church in Tehachapi (due to the space limitations in our own chapel). This is the solemn “wedding day of the Lamb” (cf. Revelation 19:7); the Almighty God bends down from heaven to receive the offering this soul is making of herself to Him, offering Himself to her in return. From beginning to end, the ceremony speaks of the wonderful totality of the gift: the soul is asked if she is willing to give everything that she is and does to God through this community, and she is reassured over and over again that she will have the help of God and His Mother to do so.

She receives a ring, a rochet (white linen garment indicating canonical status), and the “kiss of peace.” And most important of all, she receives the Body and Blood of her Lord and Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. Henceforward she can say with all totality:

“My Lover belongs to me and I to Him.”

(Song of Songs 2:16)

This day is not the end, but the beginning of a life-long adventure that the canoness will share with her Spouse. To the end, He will always embrace her and hold her in His arms. And she, with all the angels, will sing songs of love to Him.

The Engagement

FIRST PROFESSION: DECEMBER 8, 2018

On December 8, 2018, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, Sr. Mary Edmund made her first profession of vows (similar to an “engagement”), promising poverty, chastity, obedience, conversion of her ways and life in community for three years, and receiving a black veil as a sign of dedication to Christ and His Church.



Top: Sr. Mary Thomas signs her vows on the altar. **2nd row:** Our community chants during Mass. **Above left:** Sr. Mary Thomas prostrates during the Litany of the Saints. **Right:** The ring bearer (nephew of the bride).
Photos by Rudy Aguilar © Adoremus Photography 2019

We wish to express our gratitude to Rev. Mark Maxon and his parishioners at St. Malachy’s Catholic Church for their warm welcome and generous hospitality in hosting the Solemn Profession, while we await the building of our own chapel.



Margaret Scott



The Gift That God Desires

THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF SELF-SACRIFICING LOVE

During the season of Lent, God desires us to fast, which usually means fewer meals, smaller portions, abstaining from meat or some favorite food. Fasting in this sense, along with other bodily mortifications, is a good and truly necessary means of growing in Christian perfection. But there is yet still another sort of “fasting,” even dearer to the heart of God, which generally calls for greater sacrifice, and so a greater love.

“This, rather, is the fasting that I wish:

releasing those bound unjustly, setting free the oppressed, sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own.

*Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your wound shall quickly be healed...*

*The ancient ruins shall be rebuilt for your sake,
and the foundations from ages past you shall raise up;*

*‘Repairer of the breach,’ they shall call you,
‘Restorer of ruined homesteads.’*

(Isaiah 58:6-8 & 12, First Reading for Ash Wednesday Matins)

The season of Lent begins with this cry straight from the Fatherly heart of God, as He longs for all His children to know and to imitate His selfless, life-giving love. To bring this about He sent His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to preach and teach, to suffer, to die and rise again, that the world may know the extent of God’s self-sacrificing love, and, filled with that love, will “love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

This Christocentric love for our brethren, which all Christians must pray for and practice, is the beating heart, the very charism of the Norbertine Order. Termed “*communio*” by our Constitutions, this love is described as “*the existence of persons in relation to and for one another... This human communion, already founded in the will of the Creator, consists in mutual esteem, trust, sincerity, faith, responsibility: briefly, in that zealous humanity which love produces. It is expressed through every kind of service, counsel, edification and courtesy, and also through communication and a truly common life... It therefore requires the daily practice of the Lord’s word: ‘Whoever loses his life for My sake will find it’ (Matthew 10:39)*” (Constitutions of the Canonesses Regular of the Order of Prémontré).

On the day of Solemn Profession, this communion is officially recognized when the newly-professed canoness is incorporated into the community. “*Through the grace of Baptism, we are all sisters in Christ and have one Father in heaven. If we keep His commandments to the best of our ability, our union becomes still greater. Our union will also grow deeper if we are united to one*



Photo by Rudy Aguilar
© Adoremus Photography 2019

another by prayers and good works” (Prayer of Incorporation for the Solemn Profession of Canonesses Regular of the Order of Prémontré).

The new, fully-professed member of the community gives to all the solemnly professed canonesses the “kiss of peace,” saying to each one “I give you the kiss of true and sincere fellowship” to which they respond, “I accept it and give it in return.” This is not simply a ceremonial custom, but an external sign of the fraternal love between the nuns: a true and challenging love that constantly calls us to give ourselves up for the sake of the other, in imitation of the perfect charity of Jesus Christ:

*“No one has greater love than this,
to lay down one’s life His for one’s friends...”*

(John 15:13)

Day in and day out, not only during the season of Lent, the canoness is called to do for her sisters what Christ has done for her. Through her ever deepening union with Jesus, the Source of true Love, she is called to go out “in haste” to meet the needs of her sisters, caring for their needs above her own, offering her time, prayers, work and talents, sacrifices, smiles and her very self, so that they may experience God’s love through her. In this way, we may be freed, little by little, from the bonds and oppression that weigh upon the hearts of all mankind.



Left: Sr. Mary Thomas, newly professed, gives the Kiss of Peace.
Top: Shoulder to shoulder, nuns show their love for one another and the world primarily through prayer and sacrifice (here chanting the Office).
Above: Professed nuns scrub laundry during recreation.

There is, in offering oneself for those with whom one has immediate contact, a very powerful apostolic force that pulses through the Church and reaches all the corners of the world.

*“This unity among sisters manifests the coming of Christ
and from it arises great apostolic strength.*

*An assembly of this kind, established by Christ
in a communio of life, love, and truth,*

is taken up by Him as an instrument of redemption...”

(Constitutions of the Canonesses Regular of the Order of Prémontré)

By observing this “fasting,” God’s light can break forth through us: our spiritual life, far from devolving into an incorrect and self-centered mentality, expands into a selfless, life-giving, creative existence, an extension of the life of God. By turning away from ourselves and towards others in love, our own wounds are quickly healed. Through the transforming power of self-sacrificing love, the widespread ruins of lives, families, and societies, so prevalent in our modern world, can be rebuilt and raised up: the tragic breach between God and man can be repaired.

This Lent may we all give God what He truly desires:
a world restored to Him through our love.

Mothers of Christ

“THE VIRGIN SHALL CONCEIVE AND BEAR A SON...”

— Isaiah 7:14

The mystery of the Annunciation is not only a sublime topic for prayerful meditation, but, like all the mysteries of Our Lord and Our Lady, it is a reality to be actualized spiritually in our individual lives. Each vocation embodies the mystery of the Annunciation in a unique way. For the consecrated woman, it is lived out by her spiritual motherhood. Women, by their very nature, find their perfection in motherhood, in bearing life in themselves, a reality which all women, regardless of their vocation or state in life, can fulfill. For many women, this motherhood is first actualized physically within the context of Christian marriage and family life, as they bring forth new members for the Kingdom of God. For the consecrated woman, however, this motherhood is realized in an exclusively spiritual manner.

*Like Mary,
the consecrated woman is called
to be both mother and virgin —
indeed, even to be the mother of Christ in souls.*

“Whoever does the will of my Father is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Matthew 12:50). Far from rejecting motherhood, the consecrated woman, faithful to her vocation, lives the reality of motherhood in a profound way. Through her complete “fiat” to God — in union with Christ in His mission of doing the Father’s will (John 6:38), and that of the Blessed Virgin Mary’s total and life-long “fiat” begun at the Annunciation — she is called to bring forth divine life in her spiritual children. The consecrated virgin, by her total “Yes” to God, realizes her call to maternity by being the Mother of Christ in souls, a fecundity that transcends the natural, and which, with God’s grace and infinite divine mercy, bears supernatural fruit, in time and unto eternity.



Painting a statue of the Holy Family for a gift shop order.



Life at the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph

— OUR HORARIUM —

(Please call for our Friday and Sunday schedules.)

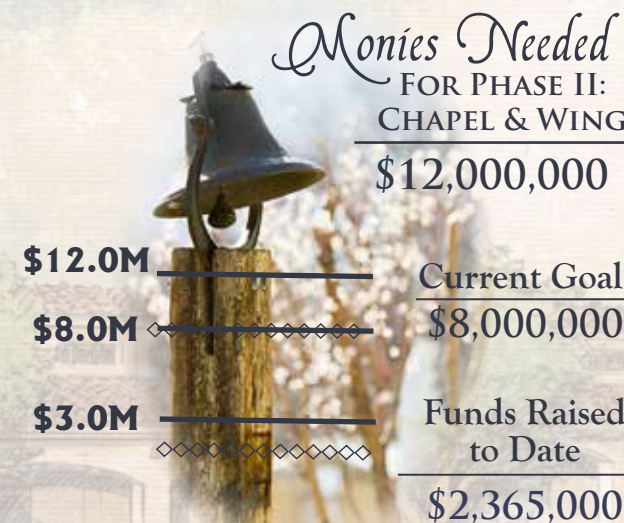
Midnight	Vigils – Office of Readings (Matins)
6:00 am	Morning prayer (Lauds) & Angelus
6:30 am	Chapter (Martyrology & the Rule)
7:15 am	Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament & Mid-morning prayer (Terce)
8:20 am	Benediction
8:30 am	The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
10:00 am	Work, Class, or Study
11:40 am	Mid-day prayer (Sext), Angelus & Rosary
1:05 pm	Mid-afternoon prayer (None)
1:30 pm	Grand Silence - prayer, rest, exercise, etc
2:30 pm	Work, Class, or Study
5:10 pm	Evening prayer (Vespers) & Angelus
5:40 pm	Lectio Divina
6:25 pm	Supper, followed by Recreation
8:00 pm	Night prayer (Compline)
9:00 pm	“Lights Out”



Chanting the Litany of St. Joseph, 2018.

MARCH 19, SOLEMNITY OF ST. JOSEPH

Monastery Expansion



R. Belcher

Conceptual Drawing of our Future Chapel
By Mark Russell, A.I.A., Radian Design Group, Inc.

In God's great mercy, we continue to receive material and spiritual contributions in support of Phase II of our Monastery Expansion Project, our future chapel and accessory wing. Phase II will address the acute space needs of our growing community, while providing the proper ecclesial and monastic architecture for the worship of God and the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. The estimated cost of the construction is \$12 million, with a minimum of \$8 million required to take the next step of commissioning a complete architectural design and blueprints. We are truly grateful to those who are assisting so generously in this endeavor, as we place all of our plans in the loving hands of God, abandoning ourselves to His holy will and timing, all for His glory and honor, and the salvation of souls.

www.norbertinesisters.org



THE NORBERTINE CANONESSES
OF THE BETHLEHEM PRIORY OF ST. JOSEPH
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— A Special Thank You —

To all who participated in our first ever
Novena of Masses for the souls of the
faithful departed, November 2–10.
During the month of November, the
cards returned to us by participants,
with the names of deceased loved ones,
remained in our chapel, a beautiful
reminder of our spiritual motherhood for
both the living and the dead.

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

Norbertine Canonesses

— WEBSITE —

- ♣ Online Monastery Gift Shop
- ♣ Photo Gallery
- ♣ Horarium in Photos
- ♣ Information on our
Holy Founder, St. Norbert

www.norbertinesisters.org

♣ MONASTERY GIFT SHOP HOURS:
Daily 10-11:30 am, 2:30-5 pm
(except Fridays, 2:30-4:15 pm)

♣ FOR GIFT SHOP PURCHASES:
Please visit our website at
www.norbertinesisters.org

♣ WE ARE HERE TO OFFER PRAYERS
FOR YOU AND YOUR INTENTIONS:
You are welcome to call us:
(661) 823-1066 – or –
email us: pray_req@cybersurfers.net or
MotherMaryA@aol.com

Please kindly help us update our address & email
database by sending us your current information.



Margaret Scott

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord.”

– Luke 1:46

On the Cover: The Annunciation (c. 1660), by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo