

The Norbertine Canonesses of the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph

FIRST FRUITS

Advent & Christmas, December 2020 / Issue 51



“Receive me, O Lord, that I may live...”

— Cf. Psalm 119:116

Reflecting the timeless grace of Christmas Day, 1121, Our Holy Father, St. Norbert, with monstrance and bishop’s crozier in hand, welcomes succeeding generations of Premonstratensian religious, offering themselves to the Infant Jesus through Our Blessed Mother.





Dear Confreres, Family and Friends of the Bethlehem Priory,

In these days preparing for Christmas, we stand in awe of a great mystery: that the Infinite, All-knowing, Omnipotent God, Whose greatness cannot be measured, acts within His creation by way of the small, simple, and silent.

Living in a time of much social and ecclesial upheaval, St. Norbert and his followers knew this well. They offered their lives to God, so that He could transform them into perfect images of His Son, and, through their prayers and sacrifices taken up into His, send His grace and mercy upon the Church and the world. God used their generous self-gift, and over the past nine centuries, countless numbers of men and women have followed in the footsteps of these first Norbertines, offering their lives in praise of the Almighty God, for His honor and glory, and the salvation of souls.

There are times in the history of the world when the forces of darkness seem to be closing in, when few souls seem to see things as they really are. Yet, Our Lord has promised that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church. Indeed, in every age He raises up new prophets, who, through lives of holiness, draw down God's grace and point out to all mankind the narrow way that leads to eternal life. We must only have the courage to follow Christ, no matter what the cost.

In this time of quiet and earnest expectation of Our Incarnate God, and as we enter the 900th Jubilee Year of the founding of our Order, an indulgenced year of grace, may we all strive to imitate St. Norbert, the man of faith, so that Christ may transform us into instruments of His loving mercy, for the Church and the world.

Prayerfully in the Christ-Child, the Ever-Virgin Mary, St. Joseph and St. Norbert,

Mother Mary Augustine O. Praem.

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

On the Cover: "Our Lady with the Infant Jesus Surrounded by Premonstratensians," circa 1601-1700, artist unknown. From the Norbertine Abbey of Grimbergen, Belgium

The Solemn Profession OF A NORBERTINE CANONESS

*"The Light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it."*

— John 1:5

On September 5, 2020, we were abundantly blessed with the Solemn Profession of our Sr. Mary André in the presence of our Bishop of Fresno, His Excellency, The Most Reverend Joseph Brennan, and our Vicar Forane, Rev. Hector Lopez. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the Mass of Solemn Profession was held, for the first time in the history of our community, in our little chapel, with Sr. Mary André's immediate family viewing the sacred rites through the opened grille window.

Though the ceremony was small and hidden, we were reminded by our Bishop that God's grace and power is not limited by space and time; for we had gathered around our Eucharistic Lord, Who, though silent and hidden, fills the world with His Light, confined neither by place or physical presence. Indeed, the joy of Christ radiated by Sr. Mary André and which permeated this solemn occasion was palpable, bearing witness, we pray, to the spiritual fruitfulness of Sister's total gift of self, a spiritual offering accepted by her Spouse at the altar of God.

"Beloved, we are God's children now" (1 John 3:2), and we pray that the Light from the Face of Our Heavenly Father will shine out to all the limits of the the world and upon all peoples, through the life of prayer and sacrifice of this newly-wed bride of His Son, and of all the nuns, that from the silent and hidden tabernacle, the darkness may be pierced by the unending rays of His grace.

Our Community with His Excellency and our Vicar Forane following the Solemn Profession



Top to Bottom: (1) His Excellency and Sister before her profession of vows; (2) A beaming Sr. Mary Andre during the Mass of Solemn Profession; (3) Litany of the Saints chanted by the community while Sister prostrates before the altar; (4) Sister signs her vows on the altar; (5) His Excellency says the prayer of consecration; (6) Mother gives Sister the kiss of peace.

— ANNOUNCING WITH JOY THE JUBILEE YEAR — Celebrating the 900th Anniversary of the Norbertine Order

1121-2021

"On Christmas night 1121,
in the solitude of Premontre,
St. Norbert gave birth
to a new community
of the ancient Order of canons,
whose branches rapidly extended
and whose fruits
the Church gathers today."

— Pope St. John Paul II, from
a letter to the Premonstratensian Order, 1993



Indulgences for the Jubilee Year

Members of the Order and the faithful who attend their churches from the first Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2020 to the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, Sunday, January 9, 2022, will be able to earn, once a day, the Plenary Indulgence, also applicable to the dead, under ordinary conditions – Confession, Eucharistic Communion and prayer for the intentions of the Pope – when they visit the churches of the Order and the churches administered by the Premonstratensians.





*“Christmas at Prémontré” by Caspar de Crayer, 1655.
From the Norbertine Abbey of Averbode, Belgium*

The Incarnation — AND — Norbertine Life

“THE ALMIGHTY GOD
BECAME MAN FOR YOU;

*having experienced in Himself
the frailty of the human condition,
He knows your clay....
Fervently ask Him
to protect you in His mercy,
and in His goodness
to help you to complete your course.”*

*— From a Sermon traditionally
attributed to St. Norbert*

The date was December 25th, 1121. The snow fell heavily, forming a dense white curtain, obscuring the wilderness of the valley. A great stillness enveloped the frozen marshland; no creature stirred amidst the frigid winter weather.

Inside the small chapel, the roof hidden by a growing layer of snow, all was light and joy and peace. The band of white-robed men chanted the Divine Office and then Father Norbert celebrated Holy Mass for the community, as they all welcomed the entrance of the Infant Jesus into the world. At the Offertory, each disciple came forth — one by one — and in the presence of his leader and spiritual master, Norbert of Xanten, each vowed his commitment to following Christ more closely through this radical new way of life under his direction and guidance.

Or so one might picture the scene... The outside world was almost entirely unaware of what was taking place in this small chapel, in the obscure swampland known as Prémontré. Had they known, doubtless most persons would not have cared. Yet the events taking place that day in the remote French wilderness would be a tremendous source of renewal for the Church throughout the world, and bring forth spiritual reverberations across the centuries.

When the “rulers of this world” (cf. Matthew 20:25) conduct

great events, it is with fanfare, trumpets, and regalia. Father Norbert was very familiar with this pomp, from his former life in the courts of the Archbishop of Cologne and Emperor Henry V; he knew first-hand the display that accompanies every courtly entourage. But he had left all of that behind at his conversion. He now deeply understood, having experienced intimacy with God within his own soul, that when the Lord does something truly great, He often proceeds with the “tiny whispering sound,” as with the prophet Elijah — God, the infinite, all-knowing, omnipotent one whose greatness cannot be measured, acts within his creation by way of the small, simple, silent, and humble (cf. 1 Kings 19:13a).

It was no coincidence that St. Norbert chose Christmas Day for their profession, for the official beginning of this new Order within the Church. Like the Christ Child, who entered this world more than a millennium before, St. Norbert and his canons were content to be hidden, obscure, poor... unknown and unnoticed. “Christ emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave...” (Philippians 2:7). Christ could have entered this world born into a wealthy, royal family, or He could have come as a fully formed adult. Yet, He chose to be conceived in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary and live out his childhood under the watchful care of St. Joseph — to outsiders, simply the poor child of an equally poor married couple from Nazareth.



1)



2)



3)

“THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST
ACCORDING TO THE FLESH!”

— The Proclamation of Our Lord’s Nativity on Christmas Eve



4)

Christ was born not in a palace, but in a stable, as there was no room for Joseph, Mary, and her unborn child, even in the inn. Jesus Christ chose the obscure, the unnoticed, the humble, the silent, and the simple.

The radical nature of St. Norbert’s action in forming a community of canons who would lead a strict, penitential monastic life no doubt found one of its inspirations in the self-emptying of the infant Christ. The ancient *Vita* of St. Norbert relates that he hurried back to Prémontré from preaching because Christmas was close at hand, and Christmas would be the backdrop for the birth of his Order. St. Norbert would gain a tremendous following and inspire reform within the Church because he and his followers embraced an authentic life of poverty and humility, because he understood so deeply that change of hearts came about not through display but through authentic conversion and through thinking as God does, not as man does. His imitation of the infant Christ’s self-emptying gave a powerful impetus to his reform in the “house of poverty” (*Vita B*, n. 51), Prémontré, inspiring countless men and women to turn from a worldly way of life to follow after him, and in so doing, to follow after Christ Himself.

Here at the Bethlehem Priory, in a tiny chapel, all covered with snow, St. Norbert’s vision lives on, as his spiritual daughters

daily take up the ancient texts of Premonstratensian chant, proclaiming the mystery of Christmas anew to a world so in need of its message.

Much like the events that occurred in the obscure valley of Prémontré, the outside world may be almost entirely unaware of the prayers of praise and supplication that are daily, hourly, offered up in our Californian wilderness for the renewal of the Church and the spiritual rebirth of souls. If they did know, doubtless many would not care.

Nevertheless, the mystery of Christmas, the spiritual power generated by God through the weak instruments of Norbertine Canonesses, the taking up of the tiny whispering sound of the Divine Office, chanted in a valley hidden from a world full of noise, are all acts of the infinite, all-knowing, omnipotent One whose greatness cannot be measured, and Who acts within His creation by way of the small, simple, silent and humble. This Christmas, in imitation of the tiny Infant Jesus, St. Norbert and his first holy disciples, may we embrace the mystery of Christmas in all its poor, humble, and silent power.

(1) Holy Mass on Gaudete Sunday (Advent); (2) Advent Wreath in the choir; (3) One of the nuns chants the proclamation of the Lord’s Nativity at Chapter on Christmas Eve; (4) The blessing of the Creche in our choir at Christmas Midnight Mass.

Events at the Bethlehem Priory of St. Joseph

✦ IN AUGUST

1) As is our annual tradition, on the Solemnity of Our Lady's Assumption, the 15th, all the nuns in our community renewed their consecration to Jesus through Mary. Also on this date, aspirant Sr. Sofia entered our community as a postulant.

2) Our small flock of dairy sheep provided so much milk that we used it in a variety of products for the community, including soft and hard cheese and yogurt.

3)-5) During the months of August, September and October, we were graced with the first Masses and blessings of our newly-ordained confreres from St. Michael's Abbey: (3) Rev. Edmund Page, (4) Rev. Anselm Rodriguez, (5) and Rev. Peregrine Fletcher (accompanied by the newly-Solemn Professed fr. Lazarus McDonald).

✦ IN SEPTEMBER

6) Barn cats are very helpful on a property such as ours, and in September some young kittens joined the ranks of our older "mouser" cats.

7) Sr. Mary André made her Solemn Profession of Vows at our monastery on the 5th.

(Please see article and photos on pg. 2)

8) On the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the 8th, Sr. Maria Perpetua was vested in the white habit of St. Norbert and received her new religious name.

9) During this month as well as in October, we welcomed some dear priest friends for conferences: Rev. Emmerich Vogt, OP (pictured), Rev. Joseph Homick, COSJ, Rev. Robert Marczewski, and Rev. Anselm Ramelow, OP.

✦ IN OCTOBER

10) A volunteer helped teach the nuns to weld, and they made steel framework to reinforce the back doors of our "nursery barn" (home for our baby live-stock), which the nuns then installed.

11) This year's apple season began in August and continued well into October, providing us with a reserve of apples that should supply our community throughout the new year.

Deo gratias!



From our photo archives: In 1999, the first five founding Sisters of our community visit the ruins of the original chapel at Prémontre.

Monastery Expansion & Our Current Needs

We invite you to help with Phase II of our Monastery Expansion Project and other pressing needs:

COMMUNITY LIVING EXPENSES:

Not unlike a large family, our community's household, kitchen, dairy kitchen, farm/animal, garden, vehicle, maintenance, utilities, office, clothing, medical, insurance, and other needs are significant. Your support is deeply appreciated, whether by check or cash, online credit card donations via PayPal (www.norbertinesisters.com/donate/), or donations which we can arrange in-house for you. Please call (661-823-1066) or email us if you have questions (norbertinecanonesses@gmail.com).

PHASE II OF OUR MONASTERY EXPANSION PROJECT:

We remain deeply grateful to all of you who are helping to build our future chapel, which will replace our current chapel, still housed in the twice-expanded converted game room and living room of the property's original 70-year-old ranch home. The estimated cost of Phase II's chapel and wing construction is \$12 million, with \$8 million required to take the next step of commissioning a complete architectural design and blueprints. With almost \$3.15 million raised to date, thanks to the continuing generosity of our dear friends like you, we continue to place all in God's loving providence, trusting that He is blessing all of you, and will raise up our chapel in His perfect timing and according to His holy will.



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

Monies Needed FOR PHASE II: CHAPEL & WING \$12,000,000



R. Belcher

THE NORBERTINE CANONESSES
OF THE BETHLEHEM PRIORY OF ST. JOSEPH

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*Supreme Moderator of the Norbertine Order
Abbot General Jos Wouters, O.Praem.*

— *A Special Thank You* —

As we enter our Order's Jubilee Year, we extend our special "thank you" to our Abbot General, The Most Rev. Jos Wouters, O. Praem., our *Pater Abbas*, The Rt. Rev. Eugene Hayes, O. Praem., and all of our Norbertine confreres and consœurs, with whom we are deeply united in Christ and St. Norbert, striving to be of "one heart and one soul on the way to God."

— Cf. Acts 4:32 & The Rule of St. Augustine

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
norbertinecanonesses@gmail.com

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



*A spiritual daughter of St. Norbert (albeit in boots),
praying amidst the Tehachapi winter-scape.*

— *St. Norbert* —

went out to preach and began his journey barefoot in the midst of the excesses of a harsh winter.

It must be stated that the man burned with such a love toward God that neither the harsh cold nor hunger nor weariness kept him back from what he had begun.

No doubt sometimes on that journey the snow reached to his knees, sometimes even to his thighs.

Nevertheless, this could not hold him back for even one day.

— Cf. Vita Norberti B